Cyberpunk 1.0

(BETA)

A novel by

Bruce Bethke

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Cyberpunk 1.0 1

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0/ 0/ : Warmstart

Okay, so it’s morning. Sparrows are arguing in the dwarf maples outside my bedroom window. Metallic coughs and sputters echo down the street; old man Xiang must have scored some pirate gasoline and tried to start his Mercedes again. Skateboard wheels grind and clatter on cracked pavement. Boombox music Doppler-shifts as a squad of middle school AnnoyBoys roll past.

Ah, the sounds of Spring.

Closer by, I flag soft noises filtering up from the kitchen: Mr. HotBrew wheezing through another load of caffix. The pop and crinkle

of yummy shrinkwrap being split and peeled. Solid thunk of the

microwave oven door slamming closed, chaining into the bleats, chimes

and choppy vosynthed th-an-k-yo-us of someone doing the program job

on breakfast.

Someone? Mom, for sure. Like, nuking embalmed meadow muffins

is her domestic duty. Dad only cooks raw things that can be immolated

on the hibachi. I listen closer, hear her cheerful mindless morning babble

and him making with the occasional simian grunt in acknol, or maybe

they aren't even talking to each other. Once Mom gives the appliances a

start they can do a pretty fair sim of a no-brain conversation all by

themselves.

I roll over. Brush the long black hair back from my face. Get my left

eye open and find the bedside clock.

6:53.

Okay, so it's not morning. Not official, not yet. School day rules:

true morning doesn't start until0/ 7:0/0/ :0/0/ , exact. I scrunch the covers up

around my cheeks, snuggle a little deeper in the comfty warm, work at

getting both eyes open.

Jerky little holo of a space shuttle comes out from behind the left

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edge of the clock. Chick. Chick. Chick. Stubby white wings flash as the

ugly blunt thing banks to pass in front. Chick. Chick. Numbers change.

6:54.

I hate that clock.

I mean, when I was a twelve, I thought that clock was total derzky.

Cooler than utter cool. The penultimax: A foot-high lump of jagged

blue-filled Lucite, numbers gleaming like molten silver poured on a

glacier, orbited forever by a Classic Shuttle. Every five minutes the

cargo doors open and a satellite does the deploy. Every hour on the hour

the 'nauts come out for a little space spindance.

Shuttle swings around the right side of the clock. Chick. Chick.

Stupid thing. Not even a decent interfill routine, just a little white brick

moving in one-second jerks. A couple months back me and Georgie

tried to hack the video PROMs, reprogram it to do the Challenger every

hour on the hour. Turned out the imager wasn't a holosynth at all, just a glob of brainless plastic and a couple hundred laser diodes squirting canned stillframes.

Chick. The shuttle vanishes behind the right edge of the clock. Gone for thirty seconds.

I lie there, looking at the clock, and mindlock once more on just how Dad the thing truly is. I mean, I can almost see the motivationals hanging off it like slimey, sticky strings: "Is good for you, Mikey. Think space, Mikey. Science is future, honorable son. Being gifted is not enough; you must study 'til eyes bleed, claw way through Examination Hell, and perhaps one day if you are extra special good just maybe you get to go Up!"

Yeah, up. To the High Pacific. Get a Brown Nose in nemawashi—the Nipponese art of kissing butt—and become a deck wiper on the Nakamura industrial platform. Or maybe the PanEuros will decide they need some good public relations, let us and the Soviets kill a few more people trying to get to Mars again. Boy oh boy.

When you're 13.75 years old and almost a sophomore in high school, you start to think about these things.

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Outside my window, old man Xiang's car door creaks open with a rusty squeal, slams shut with a sharp krummp. The sparrows explode in a flutter of stubby wings and terrified cheeping, fly off chased by a boiling stream of Chinese obscenities. I hear a deep grunt and the scrape of shoes on pavement as he gets behind the car, starts pushing.

Shuttle comes back out from behind the clock. Chick. Chick. Cargo doors pop open, in prep for the 6:55 satellite deploy. I roll over, pull a pillow onto my head, try to find another minute or two of sleep.

No good. There's light seeping in; not much, but enough to show that I'm lying between Voyager sheets and pillowcases. Wearing dorky NASA Commander AmericaTM cosmo-jammies (only 'cause all my other nightclothes are in the wash, honest). Close my eyes, and I can still see Mom and Dad smiling stupid at me as I tear open the Christmas wrap,

recognize the dumb fake roboto and cyberlightpipe pattern and start to gag, then scratch my true response and give them what they want to hear: “Geez, Mom, these are real neat!” Almost said far out and groovy, but figured that’d tip them off.

Rayno explained it to me real good once, how Olders brains are stuck in a kind of wishful self-sim’d past. Like, his bio-dad used to build model privatecars. Whenever his mom kicked him out for the weekend he’d go over to his bio-dad’s, get bored to death and halfway back again hearing about Chryslers, Lincolns. Wasn’t ‘til he was fifteen years old that he finally met his bio-grandfather, learned that the family’s true last privatecar was a brainless little 3-cylinder Latka.

Chime. Downstairs, the microwave announces that breakfast is ready. The oven door opens with a sproing. Mom says something cheerful as she slaps the foodpods on the table; Dad rustles his faxsheets and grumbles something low in reply. I make a tunnel out of my pillow, peek at the clock. 6:57.

Nope. Still isn’t morning.

Anyway, that’s where Rayno’s bio-dad’s brain got stuck. Georgie’s old man scrounges parts, rebuilds obsolete American computers, never stops ranting about how great they really were and it’s all Management

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and Wall Street’s fault that the domestic industry is dead. My Dad’s too busy to build/rebuild anything, what with his job and his first wife’s grownup kids, so he buys me space shuttle clocks. Flying model Saturn-Five’s. Apollo Hi-Lites video singles. A full-bandwidth membership in AstraNet and a Nitachi telescope.

A telescope? Hey, this is Dad we’re talking about! No mere hunk of glass could be half expensive enough for the trophy son of David Richard Harris, Fuji-DynaRand’s Fuku Shacho of Marketing (American). He bought me a zillion-power CCD-retinated fused-silicate photon amplification device with all the optional everythings. Set it on this monster tripod out on the deck—looks like Mung the Magnificent’s fritzin’ Interplanetary Death Cannon—and every night when he’s in

town and not working late we have to go out there, burn our ten minutes of Quality Time shivering in the cold and damp and trying to spot something educational.

Of course, being Dad, he's also got to shut off the programmables and insist on using the dumb manual controls. Meaning most nights we wind up looking at cloud projos, comm satellites, wreckage from the Freedom, and other stuff that might be stars or planets but he's never real sure which. Then he swings the 'scope around to point at the Fuji-DynaRand platform, hanging there fat and low in geosync like a big green 'n' gold corporate logo—which, thanks to a gigundo holo laser on the platform, is just exactly what it does look like through the 'scope—and he launches into the standard lecture about why I should want to Go Up.

Smile? Yup, I can feel a true smile coming on. No doubt about it, I'm going to wake up this morning with a smile, 'cause right now I'm thinking deep about Dad, and the Death Cannon, and Dad's library of standard lectures. Last winter, when he was out of town for a week, me and Georgie started putzing with the telescope's brainbox. Discovered we could run a lightfiber from my bedroom to the deck, patch the Death Cannon straight into MoJo —my Miko-Gyoja 260/0/ /ex supermicro—and auto-aim the thing just by clicking on stuff from the encyclopedia. Pipe

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the images to any screen in the HouseSys, or better yet, compress 'em, save 'em, and look at them "later."

When I showed Dad what we'd done, his reaction was classic. First, that little vein on the side of his forehead started throbbing. Then, his face shifted down to this deep magenta beet-look, and I thought sure he was gonna blow all his new heartgaskets.

And then, running on pure improv and with absolute no rehearsal at all, he proceeded to coredump a truly marvelous all-new version of his famous lecture, That's What's Wrong With You Damned Kids. Brilliant performance. There are fathers and there are bio-parents; there are Olders and even a few dads; but only my old man can be so total, utter

Dad.

Solid proof that I'm a mutant, you ask me.

A burst of static. A crackle, a buzz or two, and then the clock speaks up in that stupid pseudo space-radio voice it uses: "Good morning, captain. Rise and shine. --crackle— It's oh-seven-hundred —pssht— and you are go for throttle up." I cop a glance at the clock, flag that the cargo doors are open and seven little 'nauts are out, spinning on their head buckets.

Okay, it's true morning, at last, official. No avoiding it any longer. I roll over onto my back, flip the pillow off my face, hear it land somewhere with a flumpf but it doesn't sound like it's hit anything breakable. I brush the hair back from my face again, take a deep breath: standard morning smells are percolating up the stairs. De-licious hot microwaved plastic. Yummy bitter fresh-brewed caffix. True inspiring yeasty reek of irradiated sugar-glazed pastryoid. I sit up in bed, yawn, open both eyes at the same time, and finally, turn to my desk.

MoJo is black, silent. Dead.

In a nano I'm total awake. Covers fly everywhere as I roll off the bed, hit the floor barefoot, kick aside the dirty clothes and bounce to my desk. Already in my head I'm pleading as my fingers zip over the cables, testing, tugging, tweaking. Geez, don't let this be the Sikh Ambush virus again! I'm just about to crack open MoJo's CityLink box when I flag the

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Gyoja Gerbil is tottering, vague and dim, across the flatscreen. He turns slow, mouths some silent words, then bows deep and whacks the gong with his walking stick. No sound. A faint, dark dialog box pops open and my morning news start to scroll in, utter quiet and almost unreadable.

Oh. That's right; I forgot. I was up late last night, studying Death Cannon coordinates F0/140/ A22 15FF—Meghan Gianelli's bedroom window—and I turned the sound and contrast way down. Sighing relief, I spin them back up to normal, plop down in my chair, and re-exec the boot script.

The Gyoja Gerbil winks out a mo, winks back in, and bows again.

"Good morning, Mikhail Harris," he starts over. Inward, I shudder. Only

Mom and my Miko-Gyoja 260/0/ /ex still call me Mikhail. Mom I can’t do anything about, but one of these days me and Georgie are going to have to reburn the boot ROMs and grease the gerbil.

“Now checking CityNet mail for you,” the Gyoja says. He closes his eyes, like he’s concentrating; I bite my lip and tough it out. Just six more ROM commands to execute before the rodent surrenders control. Just six more, unless...

The Gyoja Gerbil frowns, freezes. A flashing red-border dialog box pops open; a hardware interrupt, generated by the CityLink deep security program. Warning! it says. Possible buffer contamination! I acknol the alert, bang into the hex monitor, dump out the contents of the flytrap and look it over.

No big deal. Two Dark Avenger viruses, one Holland Girl, an idiotsimple Gobbler and a mess of raw data that’s probably an adfax that got sent to me by mistake. Typical CityNet wildlife. For a mo, I hesitate.

Maybe...?

Nah. Nice that the rodent was interrupted, but I don’t dare try to look for a way around him with a copy of Dark Avenger in the CityLink.

I flush the buffer, and a nano later the Gyoja has seized control again.

“Now checking CityNet mail for you,” he says.

Huh? That’s odd. The samurai rat doesn’t repeat himself, usual. I lean close, watch real careful.

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“I have found these messages waiting for you, Honorable Harrissan,” he says, and he opens a window between his hands like he’s pulling open a scroll. I start to read the first line.

The top of the window slips out of the gerbil’s grip, slams shut on his right hand. Arterial blood jets bright red as little hairy fingers are lopped off neat, go tumbling down to the bottom of the screen.

What?

“Now checking CityNet mail for you,” he says again, then freezes.

Jerks back to the start. “Now checking—” Freeze. Restart. “Now ch—”

Freeze.

I pounce on the keyboard, start banging out interrupts. Oh no, it is the Sikh Ambush virus! Break. Nothing. Ctrl-C. Nothing. Option E. Nothing.

"Now—," he starts. Freeze.

Ctrl-Alt-right fist.

"Ch--ch--ch--"

Desperate and frantic, I take a deep breath, then stab my thumb down on the warmstart reboot button. The Gyoja Gerbil's head explodes, blood and brains and teeth spraying truly gross all over the flatscreen. Golly. It's never done that before.

Feeling just a little stunned, I sag back in my chair, put my chin in my left hand, and start wondering just what the Hell kind of virus I picked up this time. And why my flytrap didn't catch it. And what it's going to do to MoJo. I don't have to wonder for long; two little cartoon men in white uniforms—nobody out of any of my programs, I'm sure—shuffle out onto the screen, one pushing a garbage can on squeaky wheels, the other carrying a big shovel. They stop, shake their heads and tsk-tsk at the mess, then shovel what's left of the gerbil into the trash can and amble off. The flatscreen blanks.

I give it five seconds. Ten seconds. I'm reaching for the manual reset button when a new character darts out onto the screen. This one's a robopunk—a real techno looking 'bot with a blue chrome mohawk—and he stops centerscreen, looks around furtive, then whips out a can of

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spray paint and leaves me a hot green message:

CRACKERS BUDDY-BOO 8ER

Oh, shiite.

The 'bot vanishes. The message hangs there a mo, doing the slow fade. "Damn," I say, quiet. Then a little more aggressive. "Damn!" I look around as if afraid someone's looking over my shoulder, turn back to MoJo, and kick the leg of my desk. "Oh, damn!" The message finishes its fade and I jerk into action, bouncing up out of my chair, punching power switches, yanking cables. CityLink box switched off

and unplugged. NetLine yanked, on both ends. HouseFiber unplugged.

“Damn, damn, damn!” I hesitate a mo over MoJo’s master power switch. It’s been almost two years since the last time I shut him off utter cold.

I scowl, and hit the switch. Then I yank the power cord for good measure.

It wasn’t a virus, it was a message from Rayno. He caught somebody else poking around in OurNet. And if that’s true/true, I’m in trouble so deep I need a snorkel.

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Chapter 0/ 1

Soon as I’d finished with the total disconnect, I tore off my cosmojammies and threw them in the corner, grabbed my blue spatterzag jumpsuit off the floor and zipped it on, then dug out my blitz yellow hightops from under the bed and laced them up loose. Subroutining off to the bathroom for a mo to flush my bladder buffer and run a brush across my teeth, I popped back into my bedroom, threw my video slate and a couple textbook ROMs into my backpack, and hit the stairs flying.

Mom and Dad were still at breakfast when I bounced into the kitchen. “Good Morning, Mikhail,” said Mom with a smile. “You were up so late last night I thought I wouldn’t see you before you caught your tram.”

“Had a tough program to crack,” I lied.

“Well,” she said, “now you can sit down and have a decent breakfast.” She turned around to pull another pod of steaming muffinoids out of the microwave and slap them down on the table.

“If you’d do your schoolwork when you’re supposed to, you wouldn’t have to cram at the end of the semester,” Dad growled from behind his caffix and faxsheet. I sloshed some juice in a plastic glass, gulped it down, and started for the door.

“What?” Mom asked. “That’s all the breakfast you’re going to have?”

“Haven’t got time,” I said. “Gotta get to school early to see if the

program checks.” Bobbing around her, I faked a dribble, lobbed the

empty glass into the sink. Two points.

She looked at me, shook her head, and took a slow step forward like

she was going to block me. “You’re not going to school dressed like

that, I hope?”

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“Aw, Mom.” Ducking back around the table, I grabbed a muffin—

rice bran, sawdust and rabbit raisin, I think.

“I mean, look at you, you’re nothing but a mass of wrinkles. Where

did you find that jumpsuit anyway, in the laundry hamper?”

“No, Mom.” Faking a step back towards the hall door, I stuffed the

muffin into my backpack and velcroed the pouch.

She followed the feint. “And what about your hair? I don’t mind if

you wear it long, but honestly Mikhail, it looks like there’s something

nesting in it.”

Dad lowered his faxsheet long enough to peer over the top edge.

“Kid needs a flea bath and a haircut, if you ask me.” Oh, perfect, Dad.

Just the exact reaction I wanted. That’s why I got the horsemane style!

Mom turned on Dad and spoke to quiet him—ragging on me before

school is her job—but I didn’t hear the rest ‘cause I’d seen my opening,

taken it, and was already out the door and halfway across the porch.

“Don’t forget to boot Muffy!” Mom yelled after me.

Hand on the outside doorknob, I stopped, turned around. “Yes,

mother.” Taking a quick scan around, I spotted Mom’s Mutt lying in the

corner, curled up around the battery charger. Oh, I wanted to boot that

dog all right! But then, foot cocked, I remembered Muffy was a lot

heavier than it looked and decided I didn’t need the pain. So I bent over,

lifted the dog’s stubby little tail, and unplugged the power feed.

“Arf,” Muffy said. It stood up and began twitching through its servo

diagnostics. I gave the charger cord a sharp yank, watched it retract.

“Arf,” Muffy said again, and it began toddling towards the kitchen. I

turned around, gave one last fleeting thought to the cheery mind image

of Muffy being drop-kicked into the mock oranges, and then zipped out

the door.

I caught the transys for school, just in case Mom and Dad were watching. Two blocks down the line I got off and caught the northbound tram, and then I started off on a big loop that kept me off the routes Mom and Dad used to get to work and took me back past home and in the complete opposite direction from school. Half an hour and six

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transfers later I came whipping into Buddy's All-Nite Burgers. Rayno was sitting in our booth, glaring into his caffix. It was0/ 7:55:23 and I'd beat Georgie and Lisa there.

"What's on line?" I asked as I dropped into my seat, across from Rayno. He just looked up at me, eyes piercing blue through his fine, white-blond eyebrows, and I knew better than to ask again.

I sat down. I shut up. Whatever it was had to be important, to make it worth dumping MoJo like that, but there was no point trying to talk to Rayno when he was clammed, so I locked eyes on him. He went back to looking at his caffix, taking the occasional sip. For a mo I had this crazy idea he was being too derzky to talk just 'cause he wanted me to flag his new hair. This week it was bleached Utter Aryan White, side-shaved, and stiffed out into The Wedge. Geez, it did look sharp!

Of course it did. Rayno always looked sharp. Rayno was seventeen, and a junior. He wore scruff black leather and flash plastic; he kept his style current to the nanosecond and cranked to the max. Rayno was derzky realitized.

But after a minute or so I realized he wasn't being derzky, he was being too pissed to talk. Which was reassuring, in a way, given how worried he had me, but watching it got old real fast so I craned my neck, looked over the booth divider, gave Buddy's the quick scan. Nope, nobody else interesting in the place. Somebody back in the kitchen must have flagged me when I stuck my head up, though, 'cause as soon as I was back down solid in my seat the little trademark snatch of fifties music swooped by, stereo shifting to a focus at the wall end of the table, and the foot-high holo of Buddy McFry came jitterbugging out from behind the napkin dispenser.

“Good morning and welcome to Buddy’s!” the holo said, all bright and enthusiastic, looking just dweeby as could be in his peaked cap, white shirt, pegged chinos and penny loafers. “Today’s breakfast special is two genuine high-cholesterol eggs fried in bacon fat, two strips of real hickory-smoked bacon, and a cup of our world famous double-caffeine coffee! Sure, it’s unhealthy and ecologically unsound, but don’t you

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deserve a little guilty pleasure today?” The holo grinned, danced to a stop; pulled a pencil out from behind his ear and a pad out of his back pocket, set pencil point to paper, and froze. The pseudosax hit a peak and the music stopped.

The holo wasn’t true interactive, of course. It was just waiting for me to say something that it could compress, stick in the fryboy’s voicemail queue. I checked my watch. Ten. Eleven. Twelve...

At fifteen seconds, the program timed out. The music started up again. The holo lifted the pencil off the order pad and shook his head. “Well I can see that you’re not interested in today’s special. Would you like to see a menu, or are you ready to order now?” Again, the music peaked and died. The little dork froze, grinning.

This time it took twenty seconds to time out, and then the holo stayed frozen. Instead, a realtime voice from an actual human came through, raspy. “Look kid, you sit in the booth, there’s a two-dollar minimum. So you gonna order or what?”

Rayno cracked out of his big silence. “We are waiting for the rest of our party,” he said, in a great low and sullen. “We will order then. In the meantime, don’t ‘bug’ us, ‘man’.”

There was a lag of a coupla seconds, then the music started up again. “Oh, you need more time to think?” the holo said cheerful, as it started to dance back towards the napkin dispenser. “Okay, I’ll be back—”

Rayno closed his eyes, tilted his head back, raised his voice. “And lose the goddam holo!” Buddy McFry vanished. Rayno went back to scowling at his caffix.

I decided to see how long it’d take him to time out.

At0/ 8:0/0/ :20/ Lisa zagged in, her lank blonde hair swinging in lazy circles, her feet moving in that slow, twitchy walk that meant she had her earcorks in and tuned for music. She was wearing her mirrored contacts today, which gave her eyes a truly appropriate utter vacant look; Lisa is Rayno's girl, or at least she hopes she is. I can see why. Rayno's seventeen, and a junior—a year older than Georgie, two years and a grade up on Lisa. And where Georgie tends to fat and a touch of

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dweebism, like most true cyberpunks (and little Mikey Harris just ain't in the game, no matter how gifted his headworks are supposed to be), Rayno is the Master Controller of our little gang and he has looks and style to burn.

So, no surprise Lisa's got it locked for him. Every move she makes says she's begging for it, but he's too robo, too tough to notice. He dances with himself; he won't even touch her. She bopped over to the booth and slid into her seat next to Rayno, trying hard to get a thigh under his hand. He just put both hands on his caffix cup and didn't give her so much as a blink.

For a flicker, Lisa looked miserable. There she was, wearing her best white tatterblouse and no bra, and she couldn't even get Rayno to look at her. I'm not so good at robo yet so I copped a quick, guilty peek down her cleavage, but it's certified Boolean true/true she wasn't flashing that skin for me. Basic rules of the game: Sharp haircut beats 160/ IQ. Those who can't play, heckle. I opened my mouth to tell her she'd make more progress on Rayno if she had a cleavage to show off, first, but killed my words in the output queue. Her fingernails were getting long and nasty and that green nailpolish looked toxic.

Then the DJ in her head zapped out another tune and her miserable look flickered off. She went back to face dancing. Never even noticed it when the little trademark sample of fifties music swooped by and Buddy McFry came dancing on out from behind the napkin dispenser.

"Good morning and welcome to Buddy's!" the holo started.

"We are still waiting for our fourth," Rayno growled, low and

sullen. You'd of thought he said I love you forever, the way Lisa's eyes lit up. Buddy McFry zapped off in mid-step.

Rayno went back to glaring into his caffix. Lisa took over the job of locking eyes on him. I watched her watch him watch his caffix for a while, Rayno looking like a warped black mantis in her mirrored pinball eyes, and couldn't decide if I should yawn or puke, she was being so uncool and glandular.

Georgie still wasn't there at 8:0/ 5:0/0/ . Rayno checked his watch one

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more time, then finally looked up. "Hellgate's been cracked," he said, soft.

I swore. Georgie and I'd spent a lot of time working up a truly wicked secure for Hellgate. It was the sole entry point to OurNet, and we had some real strong reasons for wanting to keep that little piece of the virtual universe ultra-private.

Not from other cyberkids. They were just minor-league nuisances.

We could deal with them. It was our parents we were worried about:

They would truly smoke their motherboards if they ever found out what we were really up to, and now a parent—or somebody with no finesse, anyway—was messing with OurNet.

"Georgie's old man?" I asked.

"Looks that way."

I swore again. It figured. Most of OurNet was virtual; not real hardware at all. The only absolute physical piece, and therefore the only real vulnerable point, was Hellgate.

Which also happened to be Georgie's old man's Honeywell-Bull office system.

For a mo I felt hot, angry. Why couldn't Georgie's old man keep his big nose out of our business? He's the one who gave me and Georgie a partition of the Bull in the first place! He's the one who kept saying that when he was a kid he was a hacker or a phreaker or whatever the chipheads who were too lame to be NuWavers called themselves, and 'cause of that he understands us and wants to guide us. For chrissakes, he was the one who had us crack the copy protect on MegaCAD so he

could sell it bootleg!

Isn't that just like an Older? To tell you something is your private space, then go snooping through your drawers when he thinks you're not looking? It's just so utter Dad.

I was still working through the fuming mad and clenching teeth routine when Lisa quit face dancing and spoke. Surprise. She wasn't brain-dead after all, she just looked that way.

"Any idea oh, how far in he got?" When Lisa has her earcorks in she

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talks in beat.

Rayno looked through her, at the front door. Georgie'd just walked in. "We're gonna find out," Rayno said. Georgie was coming in smiling, but when he flicked his hornrimmed videoshades to transparent and saw that look in Rayno's eyes, his legs snapped into slow and feeble mode. Dragging his reluctant chubby carcass up to the booth, he unzipped his Weathered EarthTones windbreaker, pushed his videoshades back up his nose (they tended to slide down), and sat down next to me like the seat might be booby-trapped. "Good Morning Georgie," Rayno said, smiling like a shark.

"I didn't glitch," Georgie whined. "I didn't tell him anything."

"Then how the Hell did he do it?"

"You know how he is, he's weird. He likes puzzles." Georgie ran a hand through his frizzy brown hair and looked to me for backup, but I didn't particularly want to get between Rayno and somebody he was pissed at. "That's how come I was late. He was trying to weasel more out of me, but I didn't tell him a thing. I think he never made it out the back side of Hellgate. He didn't ask about the Big One."

Rayno actually sat back, pointed at us all, and smiled sly and toothy. "You kids." He looked down, shook his head, let out a little half laugh like it was real funny. "Oh, you kids. You just don't know how lucky you are. I was in OurNet late last night and flagged somebody who didn't know the passwords was dicking around with the gatekeeper. I put in a new blind alley in Hellgate and ringed it with killer crashpoints. By

the time your old man figures out how to get through them, well...”

I sighed relief. See what I mean about being derzky? All the dark looks and danger words were just for style. We’d been outlooped again; Rayno had total control all along.

BAM! He slammed a fist down on the table. “But dammit, Georgie!”

Rayno lunged halfway across the table, grabbed Georgie by the lapels and sent his videoshades flying, pushed a tight fist right under his nose. “From now on, you keep a closer watch on your old man!” For a few flickers there Georgie looked genuine terrified, like he thought Rayno

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was going to rip his throat out with his bare teeth or something.

I guess that was the effect Rayno wanted to achieve. He let Georgie sweat a mo more, then relaxed, smiled, pushed Georgie back into his seat and began straightening his windbreaker, brushing imaginary dust off his shoulders, picking up his shades and putting them back on his face.

The little trademark sample of fifties music swooped in, stereo shifting to a focus at the wall end of the table. The foot-high holo of Buddy McFry came jitterbugging out from behind the napkin dispenser. “Good morning and welcome to Buddy’s!” it said, all bright and enthusiastic. Lisa unsnapped a teardrop crystal prism from one of her necklaces, held it in front of the laser diode, and Buddy McFry shattered into a couple hundred polychromic body fragments, all twitching in perfect sync. We waited ‘til the holo stopped jabbering, then Rayno bought us drinks and raisin pie all the way around. Lisa asked for a Cherry Coke, saying it was symbolic and she hoped to move up to straight cola soon. Georgie and I ordered caffix, just like Rayno.

God, that stuff tastes awful. I added about a ton of sugar and CreamesseTM and wound up not drinking it anyway. We talked and laughed and joked through breakfast—I dunno, not really about anything, just having a good time. Then the cups and plates were cleared away, and Rayno looked around, smiled wicked, and started to give his black jacket the slow unzip.

Lisa's eyes got big as saucers. I swear, by the time he stopped with the zipper and started with the slow reach inside she was drooling.

"Kids," he said quiet, "it is time for some serious fun." One last furtive look around, and then he whipped out—

His Zeilemann Nova 30/0/ microportable. "Summer vacation starts now!"

I still drop a bit when I think about that computer—Geez, it was a beauty! The standard Nova is a pretty hot box to start with, but we'd spent so much time reworking Rayno's it was practically custom from the motherboard up. Not at all like those stupid DynaBooks they give

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you in school—those things are basically dumb color flatscreens with ROM jacks and scrolling buttons—no, Rayno's Nova was one truly ace box. Hi-baud, rammed and rommed, total ported; with the wafer display and keyboard wings it folded down to about the size of a vidcassette. I'd have given an ear to have one like it. We'd kludged up a full set of metal and lightpipe jacks for it and used Georgie's old man's chipburner to tuck some special tricks in ROM, and there wasn't a system in the city it couldn't talk to. About the only thing it didn't have was a Cellular CityLink.

But hey, with PhoneCo jacks everywhere, who needs that? Lisa undid one of her necklaces—the one that was really a twisted-pair modem wire—Rayno plugged the wire into the booth jack and faxed for a smartcab, and we piled out of Buddy's. No more riding the transys for us; we were going in style! The smartcab rolled up, fat little tires hissing on the pavement, electric motor thrumming, and we hopped in. (Lisa got herself squeezed tight against Rayno, of course, and I got stuck in the jump seat, as usual.) Georgie cracked open the maintenance panel on the smartcab's dim little brainbox. Lisa took off another one of her necklaces—the one that was really a lightfiber—and handed it Rayno, and he hacked deep into the smartcab's brain and charged the ride off to some law company. With the radio blasting out some good loud 'lectrocrack music—WZAZ, same station as was playing in Lisa's

head—we cruised all over Eastside, hanging out the windows and howling like crispy-fried chemheads.

Taking a swing by Lincoln Park, we did a good laugh on the McPunks hanging out in front of You Know Where. (Sure, we might look something like them, but there's this thing called status, y'know? We are punks with brains.) Then, on a dare, Rayno locked up the windows and redirected us through Lowertown, and we did another good laugh on all the boxpeople, MediMaints, and Class 2 Minimum Services citizens hanging out down there. Almost bagged an old black wino who was lying in the street, too, but Lisa swore he was dead already.

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Chapter 0/ 2

Riding the boulevards got stale after awhile, so we rerouted to the library. We do a lot of our fun at the library, 'cause nobody ever bothers us there. Nobody ever goes there. We sent the smartcab, still on the law company account, to hunt for a nonexistent pickup on Westside, and walked up the steps. Getting past the guards and the librarians was just a matter of flashing some ID, and then we zipped off into the stacks.

Now, you've got to ID away your life to use an actual libsys terminal—which isn't worth half a real scare when you have fudged ID, like we do—and they have this Big Brother program, tracks and analyzes everything everybody does online down to the least significant bit. But Big Brother has trouble getting a solid location on anything that isn't a legit libsys terminal, and the librarians move their terms around a lot, so they've got open lightpipe ports all over the building. We found an unused, unwatched node up in the dusty old third-floor State History room, and me and Georgie kept watch while Lisa undid her third necklace—the one that was really a braided wideband lightpipe —and Rayno got hooked up and jacked in.

Why go to all this trouble to find a lightpipe port? Why not just use a common garden-variety PhoneCo jack—say, the cellular fax port in the smartcab, for instance? Well, we could, but there's this thing called bandwidth. If the libsys hooks you into the Great Data River, then connecting through the PhoneCo is like pissing through a pipette. Slow,

and I’m told, excruciating painful.

Rayno finished patching in the last of the fibers and booted up.

“Link me up,” he said, handing me the Nova. We don’t have a stored exefile yet for linking, so Rayno gives me the fast and tricky jobs.

Through the data river I got us out of the libsys and into CityNet.

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Now, Olders will never understand. They’re still hooked on the hardware paradigm; sequential programs, running on single brains in big boxes, and maybe if you’re a real forward-thinking Older you’ll use a network to transmit the results to another big single brain.

Me, I can get the same effect from a hundred little parallel tasks all running in background in a hundred different places, once I tie them together. It’s this bandwidth thing again; the secret is to get onto a wide enough part of a good net, and then there’s only a couple nanosecond difference between running tasks on parallel processors inside the same box and running them on discrete computers miles apart. Long as your programs can talk to each other now and then...

Nearly every computer in the world has a datalink port. CityNet is a great communications system. The pirate commware in Rayno’s Nova let me setup my links clean and fast so nobody flags us. Put it all together; 256 trojan horse programs buried all over CityNet, with a secret code to let them communicate—don’t think of OurNet as a network as in NovaLAN, think network as in spies—

And you wind up with a virtual machine 25 miles across. If you lose a few nanoseconds owing to the speed of light, no big deal. Just throw another hundred processors at the problem.

Meaning, from the libsys, I chained into CityNet. From CityNet, I dialed up Georgie’s old man’s office computer and logged in. Switching into our private partition, I knocked on Hellgate and got stopped cold, but only for a mo. After all, I wrote half of Hellgate.

Oh, for a few nanos I played the game and dueled wits with the gatekeeper, but that got boring fast so I said to hell with it, punched a hole through the application floor, dropped down and started bypassing

secures on the object level. While I was down in the cellar I took a few seconds to check out the guts of Rayno's new blind alley. Cute, but more scary-looking than actual dangerous.

Half a minute later I was back up on the other side of Hellgate and into the OurNet control files. Next step was to invoke +Ultra—the decryption program—and then plunge back into CityNet and run around

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waking up trojan horses.

When everything was activated, I handed the Nova back to Rayno.

"Well, let's do some fun," he said. "Any requests?" Georgie wanted to do something annoying to get even with his old man, and I had a new concept I was itching to try out, but Lisa's eyes lit up 'cause Rayno turned to her, first.

She sang, "I wanna burn Lewis, burn Lewis."

"Oh fritz." Georgie complained. "You did that last week."

"He gave me another F on a theme!" She was so mad about it, she missed the beat.

"I never get F's. If you'd read books once in a—"

"Georgie," Rayno said softly, "Lisa's on line." That settled that. Lisa's eyes were absolutely glowing.

With Rayno's help, Lisa got back up to normal CityNet level and charged a couple hundred overdue books to Lewis' libsys account. Then she ordered the complete Encyclopedia Britannica queued up to start zapping out whenever Lewis turned on his office telecopier. Lisa could be nasty, but she was kinda short on style.

I got next turn. Georgie and Lisa kept watch while I took over the Nova. Rayno looked over my shoulder. "Something new this week?"

"Airline reservations. I was with my Dad two weeks ago when he set up a business trip, and flagged on maybe getting some fun. I scanned the ticket clerk real careful and picked up a few of her access codes."

"Okay, show me what you can do."

Right. OurNet, to CityNet, to the front door of Alegis. I knocked. It answered. Getting inside was so easy that I just wiped a couple of

reservations first, to see if there were any bells or whistles.

None. No source checks, no lockwords, no confirm codes. I erased a couple dozen people without so much as an You Sure About That? (Y/N). “Geez,” I said, “there’s no deep secures at all!”

Rayno grinned. “I keep telling you, Olders are even dumber than they look. Georgie? Lisa? C’mon over here and see what we’re running.”

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Georgie was real curious and asked lots of questions, but Lisa just looked bored, snapped her gum, and tried to dance in closer to Rayno.

Then Rayno said, “Time to get off Sesame Street. Purge a flight.”

I did. It was simple as a save. I punched a few keys, entered, and an entire plane disappeared from all the reservation files. Boy, they’d be surprised when they showed up at the airport. I started purging down the line, but Rayno interrupted.

“Maybe there’s no deep secures, but clean out a whole block of their data space and it’ll stand out. Watch this.” He took the Nova from me and cooked up a little worm in RAM that hunted down and wiped every flight that departed at 17:07, from now ‘til NukeDay or they found the worm, whichever came first. “That’s how you do these things without waving a flag.” He pressed ENTER, and it was running wild and free.

“That’s sharp,” Georgie chipped in, to me. “Mike, you’re a genius. Where do you get these ideas?” Rayno got a real funny look in his eyes.

“My turn,” Rayno said, exiting the airline system.

“What be next in this here stack?” Lisa chanted.

“Yeah, I mean, after garbaging the airlines ... “ Georgie didn’t realize he was supposed to shut up.

“Georgie, Mike,” Rayno hissed. “Keep watch!” Soft, he added, “It’s time to run The Big One.”

“You sure?” I asked. “Rayno, I don’t think it’s ready.”

“I’m ready.”

Georgie got whiney. “We’re gonna get in big trouble—”

“Wimp,” spat Rayno. Georgie shut up.

Me and Georgie had been working on The Big One for over two months, penetrating systems and burying moles, but I still didn't feel real solid about it. It almost made a clean if/then/else. If The Big One worked/then we'd be rich/else ... it was the else part I didn't have down.

Georgie and me took up lookout while Rayno got down to business.

He got back into CityNet, called the cracker exefile out of its hiding place, and poked it into Merchant's Bank & Trust. I'd gotten into them the old-fashioned way, through the PhoneCo port, but never messed with

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their accounts, just did it to see if I could do it. My tarbaby had been sitting in their system for about three weeks now and nothing was stuck to it, so apparently they'd never noticed it. Rayno thought it would be real poetic to use one bank mainframe to penetrate the secures on another bank mainframe.

While he was making with the fine-tuning and last-minute dinks to the cracker, I heard walking nearby and took a closer look. It was just some old brown underclasser looking for a warm and quiet place to sleep. Rayno was finished linking the cracker to OurNet by the time I got back. "Okay kids," he said, smiling cocky, "it's showtime!" He looked around to make sure we were all watching him, then held up the Nova and punched the ENTER key.

That was it. I stared hard at the display, waiting to see what the else part of our if/then program was gonna be. Rayno figured it'd take about ninety seconds.

The Big One, y'see, was all Rayno's idea. He'd heard about some kids in Sherman Oaks who almost got away with a five million dollar electronic fund transfer; they'd created an imaginary company, cut a bank-to-bank wire draft, and hadn't hit a major hangup moving the five mil around until they tried to dump it into a personal savings account with a 40-dollar balance. That's when all the flags went up.

Rayno's subtle; Rayno's smart. We weren't going to be greedy, we were just going to EFT fifty K. And it wasn't going to look real strange, 'cause it got strained through some legitimate accounts before we split it out to twenty dummies.

If it worked.

The display blanked, flickered, and showed: TRANSACTION

COMPLETED. HAVE A NICE DAY. I started to shout, but

remembered I was in a library. Georgie looked less terrified. Lisa looked

like she was going to tear Rayno's pants off right then and there.

Rayno just cracked his little half smile, and started exiting.

"Funtime's over, kids."

"I didn't get a turn," Georgie mumbled.

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Rayno was out of all the nets and powering down. He turned, slow,

and looked at Georgie through those eyebrows of his. "You are still on

The List."

Georgie swallowed it 'cause there was nothing else he could do.

Rayno folded up the computer and tucked it back inside his jacket.

We got a smartcab from the queue outside the library and went off

to some taco place Lisa picked for lunch. Georgie got this idea about

chip-switching the smartcab's brain so the next customer would have a

real state fair ride, but Rayno wouldn't let him do it. Rayno wouldn't

talk to him, either, so Georgie opaqued his videoshades, jacked into the

cab's broadcast television receiver, and tuned us out for a good sulk.

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Chapter 0/ 3

After lunch Lisa wanted to go hang out at the mall, but I talked them

into heading over to Martin's Micros instead. It's is a grubbish little

shop in a crummy part of UpperEast, deep in the heart of whitest

Butthole Skinhead territory, but it's also one of my favorite places to

hang out. Martin is the only Older I know who can really work a

computer without blowing out his headchips, and he never talks down to

me, and he never tells me to keep my hands off anything. In fact,

Martin's been real happy to see all of us, ever since Rayno bought that

$3000 animation package for Lisa the month she thought she wanted to

be a DynaBook novelist if she ever grew up.

Rayno faxed ahead from the smartcab that we were coming, so we had to stand out on the sidewalk for only a few seconds before the outside lock buzzed. We stepped into the security entryway. The outside door clanged shut, the power lock snicked home, and the safety scanner gave us a quick sweep. It must have been programmed to recognize cool, 'cause then the inside door slid open with a starship squeak and we were allowed into the store.

I love the feel of Martin's Micros. It's a funky, dim-'n'-cluttered kind of place: heavy square gear piled in haphazard clutters on the floor, making it a true challenge to move in any straight line; big tin racks of old half-dead Cyberspace decks and i786 motherboards reaching right up to the ceiling; light filtering in low and angular through the vertical slits in the front window ghetto armor. When I'm in Martin's I always get this feeling that if I can just look in the right corner or blow the dust off the right old circuit board, I'll find some incredible treasure—or maybe a couple of cackling cybergremlins tearing the legs off screaming IC chips and munching on their silicon hearts. Georgie says going into Martin's Micros is kind of like poking around in the ultimate techie

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grandparent's attic, and he should know, he's got three living grandfathers.

We threaded into the store, stepping gingerish around the floor junk, pausing now and again to poke at some particular interesting piece of wreckage on the shelves like maybe to see if it was alive and would bite. By and by, we made it to the island of light way in the back of the store. Martin was sitting there, in front of his customized hodgepodge monster of a personal workstation, hulking over the keyboard. He sort of looked up. "Oh, hiya Mikey. Lisa, Georgie. Rayno." We all nodded, not smiling, not looking right at him, being total derzky. "Nice to see you again." He frowned at the screen, punched in something else, then really looked up. "What can I do for you today?"

"Just looking," Rayno said.

"Well, that's free." Martin turned back to the tube, poked a few

more keys. “Damn.” he said to the terminal.

“What’s the problem?” Lisa asked.

“The problem is me,” Martin said. “I got this vertical package I’m ‘sposed to be customizing for a client, but it keeps dying the hot photon death and I can’t grok where it’s at.” Martin talks funny, sometimes.

“You mean it nukes itself?” George asked.

“Yeah.” Martin dug his thick fingers into his bushy black beard and gave his chin a good scratch. “But not in the way I expect. I mean, it had this really aggressive copy protect, y’know? Whenever you logged into CityNet it sent off a little agent program that sniffed around, looked for other copies of itself. If the agent found another copy with the same serial number it came back, encrypted your system files, and then phoned the FBI copyright hotline.”

Martin stopped scratching, sudden, and made with a wide, toothy smile. “Which is all perfectly correct and legal software behavior, of course. My client just needs to keep a—uh, offsite backup of the software. Yeah.”

We all nodded. Offsite backup. Yep. Sure. Darned if I don’t keep a few of those myself.

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Martin turned back to his workstation, took his hand out of his beard, laid it on the CityLink box. “I finally beat the copy protect by trapping the agent in a null buffer and flushing it to the Phantom Zone. But now I’m trying to make some other mods to the software, and nothing I do seems to work.” He turned, looked at me, his thick bushy eyebrows all knitted together in a frown. “Mikey, you don’t suppose they put some kind of fascist code integrity checker in there, do you?”

Rayno pushed in between me and Martin. “Rewind. Let’s start from the beginning. What’s this thing supposed to do?”

Martin looked at Rayno and shrugged. “You really want to know? It’s boring as public television.” Rayno nodded.

Martin nodded, too. “Okay.” He turned back to his workstation and started closing down files and popping up windows. “Kids, what we’ve

got here is a complete real estate investment forecasting system. The whole future-values-in-current-dollars bit: Depreciation, inflation, amortization, cost of running-dog capital, rehab incentives, tax credit recapture--"

"Interrupt," Rayno said. "You're right; let's skip that. What're the code objects? What numbers crunch?"

Martin started to explain, and something clicked in my head. Rayno said to me, "This looks like your kind of work." Martin found his cane, levered his three hundred pounds of fat out of the squeaky chair, and looked real relieved as I dropped down in front of the keyboard. I killed his windows program, scrolled into the pure source, and started getting a firm mindlock on the flow concept. Once I had the elemental things visualized kind of, I scanned his modification parameters, compared them to the original object definitions, and let my neurons free associate.

Ah. Now it was clear. Martin'd only made a few mistakes. Anybody could have; from the looks of the object code, the original author was a total dutz, with only a vague fuzzy of what he was trying to accomplish. Half the hooks on the two key objects were all wrong. Even if Martin's code mods had been perfect, they still wouldn't have worked. I banged into the system library, haywired the object defs so they behaved sort of

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right, then went back into Martin's executable and started keying in code patches off the top of my head.

"Will you look at that?" Martin asked.

I didn't answer 'cause I was thinking in object-oriented language.

Ten minutes later I had his core mod in, linked, and romping through the test data sets. It worked perfect, of course.

"I just can't believe that kid," Martin said. "He can hack object code easier than I can talk."

My voice started to come back. "Nothing to it," I croaked.

"Maybe not for you, Mikey. I knew a kid who grew up speaking Arabic, used to say the same thing." He shook his head, tugged his beard, looked me in the face, and smiled. "Anyhow, thanks loads, man. I don't know how to ... " He snapped his fingers. "Say, I just got

something in the other day, I bet you'd be really interested in." I found my feet and got up out of the chair. He hobbled over to the flyspecked glass display case, pushed aside a pile of old GridPads and 'Roo PCs, and pulled out a small, flat, black plastic case. "I've gotta tell you, Mikey, this was a real find. Most of what comes in here is just old junk, but this you won't believe. The latest word in microportables." He set the little case on the counter. "Mikey Harris, may I present—

"The Zeilemann Starfire 600."

I dropped a bit! Then I ballsed up enough to touch it. I flipped up the wafer display, opened the keyboard wings, ran my fingers over the touch pads, and I just wanted it so bad, right then and there! "It's smart," Martin said. "Rammed, rommed, fully metal and lightpipe ported; a videoshade jack for your friend there—," he nodded at Georgie. "Even has bubble memory, too, so you won't have to muck around with that chipburner."

My God, it was beautiful!

Rayno leaned on the counter, gave the Starfire a cold, cold look.

"My 300 is still faster," he said.

"It should be," Martin said. "You customized it half to death. But the 600 is nearly as fast, and it's stock, and it lists for $1200 new. I

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figure you must have spent around 4K upgrading yours."

I got my breath back. "Can I try it out?" I asked. Martin waddled back over to his workstation, plugged a lightfiber into his patch bay, and threw the coil of plastic at me. I jacked in, booted up, linked through to CityNet. Took a cruise up to the Northside repeater and logged into FIDOnet.

It worked great. Clean, quiet, accurate; so maybe it was a few nanos slower than Rayno's Nova, I couldn't tell the difference. "Rayno, this thing is the max!" I looked at Martin. "Can we work out some kind of ... ?" Martin looked back to his terminal, where the real estate program was still running data tests without a glitch.

"I been thinking about that, Mike. You're a minor dependent of an

employed Class-One citizen, so I can't legally hire you." He tugged on his beard and rolled his tongue around his mouth. "But I'm hitting that client for some pretty heavy bread on the customizing fees, and it doesn't seem fair to me to make you pay full list." He looked at the Starfire again, and got his squinty, appraising look.

"On the other hand, that Starfire you're holding is a, uh, demo model. Factory new, but it, uh, doesn't have a serial number plate." He chewed on his left index finger for a bit, then stopped, sudden, and made with a wide and toothy smile.

"Of course, you and I both know that that doesn't mean a thing, but some of my other clients might get a little, uh, nervous about that machine. So—," he went back to chewing on his index finger, and giving the Starfire a worried look. He looked at me.

He smiled.

"So tell you what, Mikey! You be my consultant on, say, seven more projects like this, and it's yours! What d'ya think? Sound like a good deal to you?"

Before I could shout yes, Rayno pushed in between me and Martin.

"I'll buy it. List price." He flicked a charge card out of his breast pocket.

Martin's jaw dropped. "Well, what're you waiting for? My plastic's clean."

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"Charge it? At list? But I—uh, I owe Mike one."

"List price. And here," Rayno grabbed some piece of junk that Georgie was futzing with and slapped it down on the counter. "Include this. Write it up as miscellaneous used gear. That way you don't have to report any serial numbers."

Martin smiled. If I didn't know him better, I'd swear it was major relief. "Okay, Rayno." He took the card and ran it through his magreader. A few seconds later the reader made with a pleasant little chime and a few measures of We're In The Money. "It's approved," Martin said, an even bigger smile on his face. He punched up the sale and started laughing. "Honestly, I don't know where you kids get this

kind of money."

"We rob banks," Rayno said. Martin froze a mo, looked dead straight at Rayno, then broke up and started laughing so hard he cried. Rayno picked up on the laugh; he's got a great Vincent Price kind of evil laugh that he uses sometimes, especially when he's fangs-out smiling. Lisa followed Rayno. Me and Georgie looked at each other for a mo, not real sure what it was we were laughing at but figuring we should at least act like we knew, and then jumped in together.

Still laughing, Rayno used the Starfire to fax for a smartcab. Then he logged out, disconnected, folded up the Starfire and headed for the door. Laughing, we followed. Laughing, Martin waved goodbye. The smartcab rolled up; we opened the outside security door and stepped out.

Rayno stopped laughing. Then he handed the Starfire to me. "Here. Enjoy."

"Thanks Rayno. But—but I coulda made the deal myself."

"Happy Birthday, Mike."

"Rayno, my birthday is in August."

He looked at me through his eyebrows, cold and truly utter serious. "Let's get one thing straight. You work for me."

The smartcab chirped for our attention. We piled in. It was near school endtime, so we routed direct back to Buddy's. On the way, in the smartcab, Georgie took my Starfire, gently opened the back of the case,

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and scanned the board. "We could swap out the 4166-8," he said, "replace it real easy with a 42C816. That'd just about double your throughput speed."

"Leave it stock," Rayno said.

We split up at Buddy's, and I took the transys home. I was lucky, 'cause Mom and Dad weren't there and I could zip right upstairs and hide the Starfire in my closet. I wish I had cool parents, like Rayno does. His dad's never there, and his mom never asks him any dumb questions.

I'd just finished up putting MoJo back together when Mom came home and asked how school was. I didn't have to say much, 'cause just

then the stove said that dinner was ready and she started setting the table. Dad came home fifteen minutes later and we started eating.

Halfway through dinner, the phone chirped.

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I jumped up and answered the phone. It was Georgie's old man, and he wanted to talk to my Dad. I gave Dad the phone and tried to overhear, but he took it into the next room and started talking real quiet. I got unhungry. I never liked tofu, anyway.

Dad didn't stay quiet for long. "He what? Well thank you for telling me! I'm going to get to the bottom of this right now!" He came stomping back into the kitchen and slammed the phone into its cradle.

"Who was that, honey?" Mom asked, sweet.

"Bob Hansen. Georgie's father. Mike and Georgie were hanging around with that punk Rayno again!" He snapped around to look at me. I'd almost made it out the kitchen door. "Mikhail! Did you cut school today?"

Dad called me Mikhail? Uh-oh...

I tried to talk confident. I think the tofu had my throat all clogged up. "No. No, of course not."

"Then how come Mr. Hansen saw you coming out of the downtown library?"

I started to hang. "I—I got a pass. I was down there doing some extra research."

"For what class?"

I froze.

"Come on, Mikhail. What were you studying?"

Damn! I wish I could be totally slick, totally smart, like Rayno. He'd know the right thing to say. He could speak the pravda without sweating. But this was my Dad, and he was putting the heavy clamp on me, and all my input and output interrupts were colliding and the words in my head were turning into a truly enormous mess. I locked up solid—like I always do when Dad starts yelling.

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“Honey,” Mom said, “aren’t you being a bit hasty? I’m sure there’s a perfectly good explanation.”

“Sweetheart, Bob was looking over some programs that Georgie and Mikhail put in his computer. He says he thinks they’re doing something illegal. He says it looks like they are tampering with a bank.”

“Our Mikey? I’m sorry, David, but this must be some kind of bad joke.”

Dad locked a glare on her. That vein on the side of his forehead started throbbing again. His face shifted down to that deep red beet-look, and he took a deep, deep breath.

I saw my opening and started to slide for the door.

“Sherri, you airheaded nitwit, this is serious!” He spun, lunged, grabbed me by the back of the collar. Didn’t think the old guy could move that fast. “Mikhail Arthur Harris! What have you been doing with that computer? What was that program in Hansen’s system? Answer me! What have you been doing?”

My eyes felt hot, teary. My face muscles went all tight and twisty and I pouted so hard it hurt. “It’s none of your business!” I screamed. “Keep your nose out of things you’ll never understand, you obsolete old relic!” The tears felt like hot burning blood pouring down my cheeks.

“That does it,” Dad said, his voice as cold and calm as death. “I don’t know what’s wrong with this damn kid of yours, but I know that thing upstairs sure as hell isn’t helping.” I blinked the tears out of my eyes long enough to see he was building up to a boiling thunderhead, but before I could get control enough to move he broke loose and went storming up to my room. I tried to get ahead of him all the way up the stairs and just got my hands stepped on. Mom came fluttering up behind as he was yanking the power cables on my Miko-Gyoja.

“Now honey,” Mom said. “Don’t you think you’re being a bit harsh? He needs that for his homework, don’t you, Mikey?”

Dad’s voice was a low, gruff thing that barely got out through clenched teeth. “I’m tired of hearing you make excuses for your son, Sherri. I mean it.” He unplugged the CityLink.

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“But honey, he’s just a boy. I’m sure it was just a prank.”

With a grunt, Dad picked up all of MoJo, ripping the Death Cannon fiber right out of its socket. “Somehow Audrey managed to raise three kids without any pranks like this.”

Incredible. For the first time in my entire life, I saw fire flash in my Mom’s eyes. “Audrey?” You could practically see her hackles go up and the claws come out. “Audrey? Look here, honey, I am sick unto goddam death of being compared to Audrey! Ever since the day we got married it’s been ‘Audrey did this’ and ‘Audrey could do that.’ If she was so goddam perfect why did you ever leave her for me?”

Dad froze. Rigid. Furious. For a mo there I thought sure he was going to break MoJo in half right over Mom’s head.

The moment passed. Cussing silent, Dad shouldered past her and started clomping down the steps. “I mean it!” he yelled up the stairwell. “This damned thing goes in the basement, and tomorrow I’m calling CityNet and getting his private line ripped out! If he has any schoolwork he needs to do on computer he can damn well use the one in the den, where I can watch him!”

I locked eyes on Mom. She was looking down at her hands, her face screwed in a tight knot, tears leaking in slow trickles down the sides of her cheeks. C’mon, Mom. Look up. Look at me. This’d be a good time to give your son some true backup, mom.

She broke, turned, went chasing Dad down the steps. “Honey?” she called out, all plaintive little girl. “Honey, I’m sorry. I don’t know what got into me. Maybe you’re right.”

Oh, fritzing terrific. Good show, Mom. I slammed my bedroom door and locked it. “Go ahead and sulk!” I heard Dad’s shout come filtering up from the basement. “It won’t do you any good!”

One last flash of anger: I crushed the model Saturn V like the paper tube it was, and threw some pillows around ‘til I didn’t feel like breaking anything else. Then I picked up my CityLink box from where from where Dad had thrown it, spliced together a working NetLine fiber

from the pieces on the floor, and went to the closet and hauled out my

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Starfire.

I'd watched over Dad's shoulders often enough to know his account numbers and access codes. It usually took a few days for the links to break apart after one of our fun runs. I didn't really need OurNet; most of the trojan horses would still be active. I jacked in, got on line, and got down to business. It took about half an hour.

My HouseFiber was out—in pieces all over the floor, to be honest—but I could backlink to Dad's computer through CityNet. Like I expected, he was down in the den, using his computer to scan my school records.

Fine. He wouldn't find out anything. Rayno'd showed us how to fix school records, oh, five—six months ago, at least. I gave Dad a minute to flounder around, then crashed in and sent a new message to his vid display.

"Dad," it said, "there's going to be some changes around here."

It took a few seconds to sink in. I got up and made sure the door was locked real solid, but I still got almost half a scare when he came thudding up the stairs. The old relic sounded like a fritzing herd of elephants.

"MIKHAIL!" He slammed into the door. "Open this! Now!"

"No."

"If you don't open this door before I count to ten, I'm going to break it down! One!"

"Before you do that—"

"Two!"

"Better call your bank."

"Three!"

"H320-5127-01R." That was his checking account access code. He went silent for a couple seconds.

"Young man, I don't know what you're trying to pull—"

"I'm not trying anything. It's done already."

Mom came padding tentative up the stairs and asked, soft, “What’s

going on, honey?”

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“Shut up, Sherri.” His voice dropped down to a strained

normal/quiet. “What did you do, Mikhail?”

“Outlooped you. Disappeared you. Buried you.”

“You mean, you got into the bank computer and erased my checking

account?”

“Savings and mortgage on the house, too.”

“Oh my God ... “

Mom said, “He’s just angry, David. Give him time to cool off.

Mikey, you wouldn’t really do that to us, would you?”

“Then I accessed Fuji-DynaRand,” I said. “Wiped your job. Your

pension. I got into your plastic, too.”

“He couldn’t have, David. Could he?”

“Mikhail!” He hit the door. I jumped back; I’d definitely heard wood

splinter around the lock. “I am going to wring your scrawny neck!”

“Wait!” I shouted back. “I copied all your files before I purged!

There is a way to recover!”

He let up hammering on the door, and struggled to talk calm. “Give

me the copies right now and I’ll just forget that this ever happened.”

“I can’t. I mean, I did backups into other systems. And I encrypted

the files and hid them where only I know how to access.”

There was quiet. No, in a nano I realized it wasn’t quiet, it was Mom

and Dad talking real soft. I eared up to the door but all I caught was

Mom saying ‘why not?’ and Dad saying, ‘but what if he is telling the

truth?’

“Okay, Mikhail,” Dad said at last, “what do you want?”

I locked up. It was an embarasser; what did I want? I hadn’t thought

that far ahead. Me, caught without a program! I dropped half a laugh,

then tried to think. I mean, there was nothing they could get me I

couldn’t get myself, or with Rayno’s help. Rayno! I wanted to get in

touch with him, is what I wanted. I’d pulled this whole thing off without

Rayno!

I decided then it’d probably be better if my Dad didn’t know about the Starfire, so I told him the first thing I wanted was my Miko-Gyoja

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back. It took a long time for him to clump down to the basement and get it. He stopped at his term in the den, first, to scan if I’d really purged him.

He was real subdued when he brought MoJo back up.

I kept processing, but by the time he got back I still hadn’t come up with anything more than I wanted them to leave me alone and stop telling me what to do. I got MoJo back into my room without being pulped, locked the door, and got my system more or less back together.

Then I booted up, got on line, and gave Dad his job back.

Next I tried to log into OurNet, but Georgie’s old man had taken the no-style approach to shutting us down. The line was radio silence dead.

Fine. There were other bulletin boards we sometimes used. I left flags and messages all over the place for Rayno and Georgie to call me, then stayed up half the night playing the Battle of Peshawar just to make sure Dad didn’t try anything. My mind wasn’t on the game, though. The towelheads were winning this time, so I had to withdraw my surviving T-72s and nuke the city.

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Chapter 0/ 5

“...mmmmf mmm mmmumble mumble mmf. --crackle— mumble oh-seven-hundred —pssht— and you are go for throttle up.”

Dim, slow, somewhere back in the vacant gray chasms of my mindspace, I flagged it was morning. That, and I’d had a rough night: wasn’t sure quite how, though. The memories were swimming around all vague and elusive like ornamental crystal cybercarp in a black garden pond. Every now and then one got near the surface and I caught the murky flash of light off green glass scales...

Oh yeah, that’s right. I remembered now. It was the giant radioactive spiders again. The mutant tarantulas of Arachnus had escaped from their

partition, crawled into my Battle of Peshawar folder. The Indian 3rd Armoured tangled with them just outside of Amritsar—which was great, took a lot of pressure off my eastern front—but the last thing I remembered, I'd just parked my T-72 in front of Martin's Micros and was getting out to feed the parking meter when I got jumped by a Vijayanta main battle tank with eight legs and spinnerets. Now I was all trussed up in giant cobwebs and lying on a shelf in the Spider King's larder...

Okay Mikey, no problem. We've gotten out of this trap before. Just need to focus, is all. I allocated another mo for resting up, then rubbed my magic ring twice, took a few quick breaths and—

Mmph! Good, I felt the webbing give a little on my left side.

Another try before the spell fades? Right; one, two—

Urgh! My left hand broke free. Slow, clumsy, I dragged it up to my face and starting brushing at the sticky silk and gunk that covered my eyes.

Bad news. There weren't any cobwebs. There wasn't anything in my face at all, 'side from blankets and my own hair. Which meant the whole

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bit about the giant spider attack was all just a dream.

And the part about erasing Dad was the reality.

Okay Mikey, too late to try for an undo. May as well boot up and see where we saved the game last night. I got my eyes open—first the right one, then the left one, then both at the same time—and took a look out the window. At gray skies. Clouds hanging low and threatening rain. A couple depressed little sparrows, feathers all puffed up and necks pulled short, clinging tight to the dwarf maple branches like the borderline drizzle had them too bummed to fly.

Bleah.

Rolling over, I got a solid locate on my feet, finished kicking them free from the blankets, migrated them down to the floor. Sitting up, I started with the rubbing eyes and I-could-swallow-an-ostrich-egg-whole yawns.

By and by, my brain came back online and I looked across the room.

MoJo was alive, bright, awake. The Gyoja Gerbil was standing there onscreen, stupid little rat-toothed smile on his face, next to a shimmering, vibrating, silent yellow gong. Oh, that's right, I'd forgotten, I'd turned the sound down last night, right about the time I'd thrown my last eight Backfire bombers against the Indian infantry. That cluster bomb sound effect did tend to get noisy. One last yawn, and then I got out of bed and shuffled over to my desk.

Parts of the boot script keyed off the keyboard interrupt. I spun the volume up, laid hands upon MoJo, and the Gyoja Gerbil broke out of his wait loop. "Good morning, Mikhail Harris," he said as he bowed deep. "Now checking CityNet mail for you." He closed his eyes, like he was concentrating. There were definite times when I wished the Miko-Gyoja 260/0/ /ex used a plain dumb ticking-timebomb icon, like normal hardware.

The gerbil frowned, and froze. A flashing red-border dialog box popped open: Warning! Possible buffer contamination!

Idiot machine. Of course there's buffer contamination. There's always buffer contamination. This is CityNet, for chrissakes; the day I

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don't have a virus in the flytrap is the day I start to worry, 'cause it means I've caught something that knows how to bypass a flytrap.

I tapped the flush button. The gerbil bowed again, then spoke. "I have found these messages waiting for you, Honorable Harris-san." He opened a window between his hands, like he was pulling open a scroll.

I scanned down the list. Hmm. Junk mail. More junk mail. Uh oh, a message from CityNet Admin about—scratch that, just some real official-looking junkmail. Today's fashion forecast: Gritty 2nd Classer Realism in the morning changing to candy-coated Nineties Nostalgia by late afternoon. A couple notes from the Battle of Peshawar SIG; these I piped to a temporary folder and flagged for later reference.

Nothing even slightly like a mention of the Big One, which was a good sign. But also nothing from Georgie or Rayno, which could be bad.

Real bad.

Nervous, I banged out of the mail program, slipped out to CityNet proper, and rode the stream up to the Northside repeater and started poking around the bulletin boards.

Nothing. No new postings from Georgie. No new messages from Rayno. Not even a howdy-do from Nanker Phelge, the pseudonym we used when we were breaking into other people's threads and being either subtle, funny, or devil's-lawyer annoying.

I decided to hope the deadzone quiet just meant it was still too early in the morning for Georgie and Rayno, and logged out.

For a mo I gave some serious thought to changing my socks and underwear, but nah, I'd have to take off my blue spatterzag jumpsuit to do that, and the jumpsuit was just starting to get that good wrinkled 'n' baggy look. So I pulled on my blitz yellow hightops—didn't even bother to tie 'em—and clumped over to the stairs.

Mom and Dad were still in the kitchen, talking real low. Soon's they heard my feet coming down the stairs they clammed. I plodded down the stairs, did the bleary trudge into the kitchen, flashed around a big yawning smile as I dropped into my chair. "G'morning, Mom." No response. "G'morning, Dad." Dad lifted his faxsheet a little higher,

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blocking off eye contact.

Okay, I could play this game as long as they could. "Great weather, innit?" No response. And now that I flagged it, no plate on the table for me, either. "Geez, a day like this, a growing boy needs a good breakfast, y'know?" I heard a slurp from behind the faxsheet, then the clink of cup landing on saucer.

I looked at Mom.

She looked down at her watch.

I smiled at Mom.

She took a bite out of her sweetroll and followed it with a gulp of caffix.

Hmm. This was turning out to be a tougher crack than I expected.

Still, if my experience with the nets counted for anything, it showed that

the bigger the stonewall, the more likely it was there was a back door. Provided, of course, that I was willing to try something stupid enough to find it.

I turned to the self-supporting faxsheet at the right end of the table, allocated a mo to studying the fingers that peeked around the edges. Yep, I had 95-percent confidence those were Dad's fingers. The big, heavy, gold wedding ring looked kind of familiar.

"Y'know, Dad," I said, casual. "I been thinking, there really isn't a whole lot more I can learn at school. I mean, the teachers are all truly lame, y'know?"

No response.

I took a quiet deep breath, screwed myself up to output the next line, toggled to blurt mode. "So I was thinking, why don't I take the next couple days off? Sort of give my brain a rest, y'know?"

Incredible. No words. No gasps. I was sure that statement would've gotten me some whitened knuckles, minimum, but he didn't so much as rustle the faxsheet. I was still looking amazed at him, trying to think of something else that'd top that line, when his smartcab rolled up out front and started bleating.

The faxsheet collapsed in on itself and leaped onto the table. Dad

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jumped up like his chair was on fire, snarfed one more slurp of his caffix, grabbed his briefcase. "Oops. Gotta go, sweetheart." Mom and Dad traded quick dry kisses as he darted out the door.

"See you tonight, honey," Mom said.

"See you tonight, honey," I echoed, sarcastic to the max.

No response. For just a mo I started to wonder if maybe I was dead, a ghost—involuntary, my right hand started spidering over to check my left wrist for pulse—then I decided no, that was stupid, paranoid, and ridiculous. Mom and Dad were just trying to be too derzky to notice me, was all.

Which chained into a true smile. With Dad gone, this was going to be so easy. Whatever else Mom had going for her, she was total

incapable of keeping derzky. I allocated a minute to studying her, mapping out just the exact perfect approach path to blow her cool wide open.

Before I could say anything, she checked her watch again, clucked her tongue, stood up. "Well, well, look at the time." Scooping up the cups and plates, she stacked them in the sink, wiped her hands on the towel, and was out the door. I heard her umbrella sproing open and the screen door bang shut.

Well I'll be glitched. She'd gotten away. And they truly had shut up and left me alone.

I was still working out the permutations on this when the porch door creaked open a few inches and four heavy little feet came shuffling into the kitchen. "Arf," said Muffy. "Arf arf." It waddled over to Mom's empty chair, sat up on its hindquarters, raised its front paws to beg. "Arf. Arf arf."

It was a tricky shot—short, high and arcing—but I beaned the little sucker with a wax apple from the fruit bowl. "Arf arf arf," it said, excited. The red vinyl tongue rolled out of its smiling, dry mouth. Its little vestigial tail started thumping a mile a minute on the floor.

Idiot machine. No brains at all, just patterned responses. Couldn't even tell the difference between a loving pat on the head and a major

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klonk from a ...

Sudden, I knew what I was going to do with this ugly, cloudy day.

Breakfast was a couple microwave pizza muffins and a pouch of GrapeOla Cola. Then I put my back into it, started rearranging the kitchen furniture. Together, me and Muffy had endless—well, minutes anyway—of fun. I'd move a chair, and start calling. "Here, Muffy. Heeere, Muffy!"

"Arf. Arf arf." Waddle waddle waddle waddle KLONK! It'd back up two steps, shake its head, turn 90 degrees and resume waddling.

I'd move the chair. KLONK!

This lasted maybe an hour, Muffy trying to learn the floor map and

me changing it with every collision, until at last Muffy's poor little RAM chips were just so garbaged with conflicting data that it wouldn't move. Instead, it backed itself into a corner, drooped its ears and stubby little tail, and started up with this real obnoxious sawtooth whine.

Okay, I'd had enough fun in the kitchen. I moved all the furniture back to where it was when I started, stepped into the dining room, started to call again. "Here, Muffy. Heeere, Muffy!"

The thing's ears perked up. Its head tilted up and started moving side to side, like it could truly see something with those round, glassy, blind eyes. (Actual, the head movement was part of its sound-locating routine, more like a radar, really.) "Heeeere, Muffy!" I moved a magazine rack into the doorway.

Muffy beelined for the porch, backed itself onto the prongs of its battery charger, and shut down.

Hmm. Maybe it was smarter than I thought.

With the doggoid out of action, I committed some serious brains to the problem of what I wanted to do next. The answer came on me cold and sudden: Dad's computer.

Sure, he'd let me use it for schoolwork once in a while. He'd even had me install software for him, once or twice. But he was always there to watch over my shoulder, and there was one partition on his optical drive he'd absolute forbidden me to ever poke around in.

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Which was not unlike putting a Do Not Open Until Xmas tag on it, y'know?

One more look out the front door to make sure Mom and Dad'd truly left for work, then I strolled casual over to the den—looked around quick to be absolute utter positive I was alone in the house—slid the door open and slipped in. Dad's computer was sitting there on the sidetable, silent, inert.

Dumb.

It was a Fuji-DynaRand box, of course; a big, ugly, square industrial kind of thing, 'bout six times as large as it really needed to be. The Ultra

Executive PowerMate 5000, or something like that: with a big oldfashioned CRT tube sitting on a swivel stand on the top, a nine-zillion button keyboard like something out of a jet fighter cockpit sprawled out in front, and this great big multi-switch—I don't know, mouse doesn't seem right. Had to be a rat, at least. Maybe a woodchuck. I think Fuji-DynaRand builds these things to government spec. Soviet government spec.

Slow, quiet, like it could hear me, I tiptoed into the den and snuck up on Dad's computer. It was a weird, weird feeling. Like I was alone in church and about to crap on the altar or something. I was almost afraid to touch it. A last, quick look behind me—yes, yes, I was alone, dammit—and then I laid a hand on the keyboard.

The spell broke. It was at least somewhat like a real computer, and I was without doubt Mikey Harris, Def Cyberpunk. I dragged over a chair, cracked my knuckles, dove in—

To a dry swimming pool. Dad's Ultra Executive PowerMate 5000 really was dead. Nothing happened when I banged in the screen restore command; nothing happened I smooshed down the function keys. I took a quick tour of the faceplate, trying to remember where the status LEDs were, and found the problem in a mo. Dad hadn't just put his computer to sleep; he'd shut it down cold. I groped around the sides of the case until I found the power switch, flipped it.

Nothing happened.

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I traced the power cable back to the surge protector. It claimed to be working, but I hit the breaker reset anyway. The LEDs flickered; in a little plastic voice the surge protector said, "Working." I climbed out from under the table and checked Dad's computer again. It was still dead. But this time I noticed the empty fuse holder sitting in the paperclip cup.

Took me about fifteen minutes to plod down to the basement, dig out a replacement fuse, install it. When I got done and hit the power switch, though, I was rewarded with a real satisfying flicker-flash of LEDs, a pleasant whir of cooling fan, a ratchety noise from the optical

drive, and—

FDIX ERR: 01FF AA00 0000 DEV NOT MTD

The hell? Dad couldn't have. He wouldn't have. I fumbled with the latch on the drive door 'til I remembered how to spring it. The optical media slot was empty.

Dad had. He'd secured his computer in the most crude, effective way; taken the mass storage disk right out. And I knew Dad well enough to bet my soul that that laser disk was sitting safe, secure, and totally untouchable in his briefcase. Ninety-nine percent probable I could turn the den upside down and shake it and still never find that disk.

Still, I did the search. I had to. Then, when the missing laser disk proved truly missing, I shut everything off, crawled back under the table, and unscrewed the power fuse. No point in advertising that I'd been messing with Dad's machine—if for no other reason than I didn't want him to know he'd beat me so easy. I took one last careful look around, made sure that everything was back exact where I'd found it. I was just stepping out of the den and easing the door shut when the voicephone in the kitchen started chirping.

Whoever it was, they hung up before I could get to it and answer.

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Chapter 0/ 6

The rest of the morning ran about the same. I wasted another half hour or so just rattling around downstairs, channel surfing on the TV and trying to find something interesting to do. But there was nothing on the tube worth the effort of watching and the weather outside had changed from cloudy, cool and misty to cloudy, hot and muggy. So I cycled through a few more ideas, all of which went flat almost soon's I thought of them, then punctured another pouch of GrapeOla Cola and trudged back upstairs. The Gyoja Gerbil was sitting there waiting for me there with a whole new batch of CityNet mail.

Correction: CityNet junkmail. Still no fallout from CityNet Admin after yesterday's little fun, good; still no sign of life from either Georgie or Rayno, bad. I skimmed the rest of my mail, trashed it all, then

reopened the folder I'd packed with messages from the Battle of Peshawar SIG and settled down for some serious reading.

Even that went poor, though. Nothing worthwhile in the SIG mail; no playing hints, no character sets, no software hacks to let me change the game params. Just a whole lot of invites to join network gaming groups and, while I truly love to play Peshawar single-user, I absolute hate to play it group.

Why? Well, it's like this. Battle of Peshawar is a historical roleplaying game, set in central Asia during the Breakup Wars. Only it's really more like about six different games, depending on the role you choose. Like you can play the MIG pilot or the tank commander, and then it's a real neat arcade-style shoot'em up where you go around blasting things into slag until you either run out of fuel, run out of ammo, or run into something that blows you to insignificant bits. Which, by the way, you always do.

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After arcade-level, the stakes go up. You can play the company or division commander, and start looking more at the map and worrying about things like advance and supply lines. Or you can play the Army Group commander, in which case you have to really trust your division commanders and start thinking about things like interservice coordination and keeping comm with Moscow open. You can even play the big guy in Moscow and sweat over the whole geopolitical business, like for example if your tanks push too far into northern India the Poles might try to retake Byelorussia again, or the ChiComms might come busting out of Sinkiang and flatten Alma-Ata.

And that's the whole problem with playing Peshawar on net. When I play single-user, I can be anybody. The computer plays all the other parts, competent, no surprises, and I am the random factor. If it's going bad, I can go nuclear whenever I feel like quitting. If it's going good, I can keep saving game a mo before total death and keep the stalemate running almost forever.

When I play on net—at least, when I play with any of the good net

groups, the ones that keep player stats offline where I can't fix my numbers—little Mikey Harris is just one more minor factor who most times ends up playing a tank platoon. Maybe if I'm real lucky I'll get command of an armored company, but in net Peshawar, at least, it seems the primary job at my level is to get killed carrying out stupid orders from higher up. Once— once, I racked up enough points to make general in the Central Asia Army Group, only to have the klutz running the Turkestani Group open up a hot western front with Iran.

Ten moves later the Iranians had rolled clear up to Gur'yev, taken all the Caspian Sea oil reserves, and cut both the Krasnovodsk and Aral'sk railroads. Leaving my armored companies fifty kilometers outside of Peshawar with full magazines and absolute bone dry fuel tanks. Sometimes I think the whole point of network role-playing Peshawar is to keep the young players from getting enough experience points to steal the good roles from the old clods who run the game.

Not unlike school, at that.

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By noon I'd bounced around CityNet enough to be bored. I'd hit all the bulletin boards I felt like hitting; nothing caught my interest. I'd tried my hand at a new hack—the University Medical Center database. There are four universal passwords that are the mark of truly sloppy system security: TEST, ADMIN, XYZZY, and the one that cracked me into MedBase, KEN SENT ME. That's when I logged out. Anything that easy to hack obvious wasn't worth the effort to do it. For lunch I went downstairs and zapped a couple krillburgers and some Tater Crispins.

The voicephone rang while I was nuking the foodlike products; this time I caught it on the third chirp, but whoever it was, they hung up soon as I said, "Hi."

Oh, well. Maybe some phonepunk'd figured out a new way to bypass our prank call interceptor. I shrugged, hit the disconnect button. Then decided, as long as I had the phone in my hand, I might as well call Mom and Dad and see if they were talking to me yet. Wiping the tater grease off my fingers and the handset, I carried the cordless over to the

table and punched in the direct number for Fuji-DynaRand's call-routing system.

Mom and Dad both work for Fuji-DynaRand, y'see; same building complex, in fact. They ride to work separate 'cause Dad, being a Fuku Shacho, gets a private company smartcab, while Mom, being just an Administrative Facilitator (or is it Facilities Administrator?), has to take the company trampool. Least that's the way Mom explains it, and she seems to think it makes sense. The way Mom also explains it, she used to be Dad's Personal Facilitator, but after he divorced his first wife to marry her she had to transfer to a different division. All of which, I guess, has something to do with why Dad keeps insisting that that breathy-voiced "Faun" who intercepts his phone calls is just a sim'd figment of the voicemail system.

If she is, she's the closest thing to an AI I've ever run into.

Whenever I ask Dad about that he just laughs and says she has no true intelligence—then Mom scowls at him and says she can believe that—but I keep wanting to try a Turing test on Faun all the same. 'Course, if

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she is human, all that'll prove is that she's an airhead.

But anyway, all my calls to Dad's line got the instant route to Faun again, which wasn't much of a surprise knowing Dad can program his phone to lateral off calls from certain numbers. When I couldn't get through to Mom, though, that was kind of an eye-opener. I initiated a hope that maybe they were doing a nice lunch together and decided to bop out to the porch and check up on Muffy.

I swear, when I lifted its tail to check the charger prong, the thing growled at me.

#

After lunch, I at last hit on a worthwhile project. Splicing together a working lightpipe from what was left of the Death Cannon fiber, I patched the Starfire direct into MoJo and commenced with the big download. All my pirate commware; all my favorite tricks and treats programs. Most of Peshawar, though I had to scratch the arcade mode 'cause the graphics looked truly terrible on that waferscreen. The

Meghan Gianelli freezeframes looked truly terrible, too, all verticalcompressed and bloaty, but I managed to find memory space for my four favorites anyway.

Around 2:00, I heard a heavy throbbing outside and took a look out my bedroom window. It was just some big ugly green privatecar with blackfilm windows cruising down the street, slow; a diesel, from the sound of it. Which struck me as odd: we don't get many petrol-burners this far off the expresswa—

Jesus H. Christ! A big dark car cruising by slow? What the Hell have I stirred up, the KGB? The IRS? Heart thumping hard, back against the wall, I cautious edged up to the window and peeked out again.

The car was gone, down the block, around the corner. Laughing silent at myself for being such a total paranoid, I went back to the big download.

Around 3:30, the voicephone started chirping again. By this time it'd gone past starting to get and become full adult phase annoying, so I tried to say to Hell with it and let it ring. But whoever was on the line let it go

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on, and on, and on, until at last I decided to play the chump and go for it one last time. I checked to make sure the process I was running would be okay by itself, trudged out to the hall, picked up the voicephone, and cranked up my best guttural surl. "Yeah?"

Nothing. Dead air; just another prank call. I was doing the windup to slamdunk the phone back in its cradle when something caught my ear. It didn't sound right, for a blank line. I listened closer: sounded like heavy breathing.

I raised my voice. "Hello? Who is this?"

No, not heavy breathing. Sobbing.

"Who are you? Why do you keep calling?"

A sniffle, a plaintive little whimper.

The bit flipped in my head. "Mom?"

Click. Then dial tone.

Had to be Mom. Had to be. I quick punched in her work number, but

the Fuji-DynaRand phone system intercepted my call and routed it off to voicemail Twilight Zone.

Oh well, I'd figure this out when she came home. I went back into my room, plopped into my chair, and got back to work.

#

I was just finishing up with the download when Mom's tram came rumbling up out front. I snapped the lightfiber apart, stashed the Starfire in my closet, hurried downstairs to meet her at the door. She just pushed right past me; wouldn't talk to me, wouldn't look at me. I tried to follow her, but she plowed straight into her bedroom and slammed the door. I watched for a while, wondering whether I should barge in, stand out in the hall and try to talk through the door, or what. Then I flagged there was no light coming through the crack under the door.

Weird city. She was sitting in her room, in the dark, crying. Which was not something I had a whole lot of experience dealing with.

Dad came home around five, and Mom finally came out of her room. Supper was another utter silent deal, both of them passing dishes around me like I wasn't there and absolute refusing to make eye contact

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with me. They let me have a plate, though, which was a promising sign.

But after supper Mom and Dad retreated into the den, shut the door, started talking. I eared up to the door, but all I caught was the occasional sob from Mom and a basic low angry rumble from Dad.

Fine. The big ignore was getting real old. I went upstairs, slammed the door of my room, booted MoJo. Soon's I hit CityNet I flagged that Rayno had been online—at last!—and left me a remark on when and where to find him. Along about eight, I finally got him online and in chat mode, and he told me Georgie was getting trashed and very probable heading for permanent downtime. So, just to restore some cool, I started telling him all about how I'd erased my old man—

He interrupted, cut me off. Said he was real extreme busy at the moment, but we should get together offline to talk about it later. We traded a few ideas on times, locations; finally settled on 22:00 at

Buddy's. Then he terminated the chat, and I logged out of CityNet and checked my realtime interface.

Omigod, it was after nine already. I had bare time enough to drag a comb through my hair, get my cuffs rolled up just right, jump into my sneakers and wrap up in my blitz yellow MaxPockets windbreaker.

Almost as an afterthought, I grabbed the Starfire out of the closet and slipped it into the inside groin pocket of my jumpsuit.

Hey, I was a member, now. Maybe my parents wouldn't buy me scruff leather, and maybe my hair would never be halfways as good as Rayno's, but I could pack some power.

Mom was in the kitchen, kleenexing the runny mascara from her puffy red eyes, when I came bouncing down the stairs. "Mikey! Where are you going?"

"Gotta zip, Mom. Gotta meet some friends." I hurdled Muffy and went linear for the door.

"But honey, it's so late." She darted a glance into the dining room, like she wasn't sure if she should call for Dad.

"No sweat, Mom. I'll be back before curfew." I kicked the screen door open and charged outside. The night was dark and muggy and

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breathless.

Mom followed out onto the steps. "Mikey, come back! There's something—" I took off running down the street.

I lucked out. A tram was just pulling up to the corner when I got there. I jumped on, zipped my pass through the magreader, found a nice seat by the window. When we rolled back past the house Mom and Dad were out on the front lawn, whipping up into what looked to be a real good argument. I gave them a smile and a little half-wave. Dad came running out into the the street, shaking his fist and shouting something at me, but I couldn't hear 'cause the window was sealed. So I just smiled at him.

I love airconditioning.

#

The tram rolled up to the corner near Buddy's; the door opened with a little pssht. I stepped out, cool and slow, and started to walk casual up the street. It was a beautiful night for a walk: warm, muggy, not a breath of wind. No stars I could see over the streetlights and neon; no moon, just a diffuse red glow reflecting off the low clouds over the city, broken by a few laser-green cloud projos. No Fuji-DynaRand platform beacon shining down on me like the All-Seeing Eye of God.

Off on the horizon, heat lightning played hidden and silent in the folds of distant thunderheads.

The sidewalk wasn't empty, of course. The usuals were there: a clot of blue-mohawked McPunks, talking tough and staring squinty over their shoulders at the squad of Asphalt Surfers halfway down the block. Four or five heavy-painted pickup girls, smelling like my Grandma Jessica's perfume collection on a bad day, patrolling their ten feet of sidewalk space and keeping jealous eyes on the competition. A drooler, wearing a long coat that from the smell doubled as a urinal, sitting in a dark doorway, caressing a paper-bagged bottle. Two real overdressed and nervous Olders, standing by a smartcab pickup point, looking around themselves like they'd stumbled into the slums of Calcutta or something.

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Fine. They could be nervous. Me, I had a Starfire down in my groin pocket, cold, heavy, and reassuring. C'mon, you Cool Jerks, you Rollerbladers, you lame ChemieCrispies!. I'm packing true power now! You mess wif' me and I be annihilatin' you!

Confident, total derzky, I flipped open the door and strolled into Buddy's. Rayno was there already, sitting in our booth, watching the door.

He was not smiling.

Okay, something had him pissed. So what's new? I bopped over to the booth, plunked into my seat, fired off a broad grin. He looked at me through his eyebrows. Frowned. Looked down, and tried a sip of his caffix. "What's on line?" I asked, bright and enthusiastic. He just scowled at me some more.

“I thought I could depend on you,” he said at last.

I cocked my head, looked at him weird. This was not what I was

expecting.

“Mikey,” he said after another sip, “we have a major league

problem. You have put us people in a state of serious risk.”

It was me he was pissed at? I bogged a mo, then found my voice.

“Huh? Rewind. Rayno, what are you talking about?”

He looked down, took another sip of his caffix. “You know how

Georgie’s old man cracked OurNet?” he said, soft. “Hung a buffered line

printer on his Honeywell-Bull. Echoed your CityNet online session

direct to paper. Got a byte-for-byte copy of everything we did.

Gatekeeper passwords. Trojan horse addresses. Activity committments.

Everything.”

I scowled too, and shook my head. “Oh Rayno, that’s—that’s

pathetic. I mean, talk about style, total lack of.”

Rayno looked at me, and his eyes were hot skewers. “You miss the

point, Mikey. Who cares about style now? He’s bagged us.” He paused,

touched his cup but didn’t drink, then looked at me again. “You

promised me this could never happen. You told me never in a million

years could he crack the secures on OurNet. I believed you, Mikey. I

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trusted you.”

Suddenly, my voice was a choked sputter. Rayno was being so

unfair. I mean, how could he expect me to bulletproof us against

something that dumb?

Rayno sighed, and gave me a sad smile. “Face it, Mikey, you porked

up bigtime. Your ass is dogfood now. Question is, what are you gonna

do to protect the rest of us?” I was still trying to find an answer for that

when he drained his caffix cup, sat up straight, and toggled to normal

voice. “And now, you can do me a big favor and beat it.” He leaned back

in his seat, looked away, made it clear that the audience was over.

Just like that. I stood up, fighting for words. Rayno thought he could

blow me off that easy? I felt the Starfire bulging in its pocket, and

sudden I started to flush hot and mad. He thought he could just throw me away? I'd show him! He wouldn't be nowhere without me! I was equal, now! Spinning around, I clenched my fists and stomped straight out the door.

They were waiting for me out on the sidewalk. Two older guys with grim faces and dark business suits; the short, wide one studying a photograph, the big, man-mountain one keeping up a scan of the street. I recognized them immediate from a thousand vids: Gestapo. KGB. Brain Police.

"You Mikhail Arthur Harris?" the short one asked. The mountain started to move towards me.

"Who wants to know?" I said. The attempted snarl came out a nervous squeak.

"Are you Mikhail Arthur Harris?" Shorty asked again.

I faked left, broke right, started running. A third one stepped out of the shadows between two buildings and grabbed me. Man-mountain lumbered over to help Number 3 hold me while Shorty barked something into a walkie-talkie.

The big ugly green privatecar with the blackfilm windows came roaring up in a screech of tires and a cloud of stinky diesel smoke. Shorty popped the back door open and dove inside; the other two pushed

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my head down and forced me into the car, while a Number 4 came jogging up the street from the other direction. Boy, they'd been prepped for me. I hardly had my face out of the upholstery before they had the plastic cablecuffs zipped tight and the doors slammed shut.

With another screech of rubber and blast of burning petrol, we were off and jouncing down the street. Hard left. A hard right, onto the expressway. The engine opened up with a throaty roar. Somewhere around the Crosstown ramp I finally fought through the icy terror and got my voice back. "Who the Hell are you guys? Where you taking me? I got rights!"

Shorty, in the jumpseat, turned away from the window and looked at

me cold and black. His voice was gravelly and murderous slow. “Sure, boy, you’ve got rights. Sometimes I lie awake nights and count them, just to make myself crazy.”

I shut up, cringed, tried to slide down in the crack between the seat cushions. Five minutes later we whipped off the expressway and into the airport. The car ground to a stop in front of a private hangar. Shorty jumped out first and started directing things, while Man-mountain and Number 3 manhandled me out of the car and stuffed me into a private Lear with couple sour-faced old guys in dark green uniforms. Man-Mountain pinned me in a seat with a forearm across my chest until Number 3 had my seatbelt latched. Shorty said something into his walkie-talkie and slammed the hatch. The turbines lit up with a rising, piercing, nail-in-the-ear whine. We rolled forward for a bit in jerks and turns, then stopped.

Then acceleration like a big hand pushed me back deep into the seat foam.

An hour later, two hours later, I don’t know: Too scared to try talking (not that the guys in the green uniforms were answering, anyway), flying through the night without a shadow of a word about who these guys were or where they were taking me, the noise of the engines like crazy dentist’s nanorobots drilling into my ears, I finally fell into a nervous sleep. In my dream Dad was a fire-breathing cyborg

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dragon, and Mom kept politely asking him not to breath so much fire. Georgie was there, blimping up and sprouting roots like an old potato, and Lisa was slowly peeling off her tatterblouse. But I never got to see what was underneath, ‘cause just then Rayno came crashing through the front plate glass of Buddy’s with a whole squad of blackshirt Lucasfilm cartoon Nazis ...

Somehow, though, I could never quite figure out whether he was fighting them. Or leading them.

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Chapter 0/ 7

I woke up with an earache and numb hands. The numb hands part I understood—soon's I tried to stretch and yawn, and felt the tight plastic cuffs biting into my soft, skinny wrists—but the other thing remained a puzzler. Earache? The little inference engine in my head did a quickie cold-boot:

CONDITION: Eardrums hurt

/because/ cabin pressure is rising

/because/ plane is losing altitude

/and/ plane is still in controlled flight

THEREFORE: We're landing! I snapped full awake and pressed face against window, looking for landmarks. It was a murky pastel false dawn down there, and that made it hard to tell.

Meantime, the earache was getting fierce. I tried to swallow and pop my ears, but my mouth was too dry. Maybe I could ask the gestapo for a dixie of water? I scanned the two sitting up at the front of the cabin and scratched the idea. From the crisp, serious look of their dark green uniforms I guessed we weren't going to Computer Camp.

So where were we going? I got a dry swallow down and the earache backed off some, but I was still having trouble thinking clear. Cold, tired, thirsty: the Starfire in my inside pocket digging into my belly like a little plastic brick, my headchips seriously garbaged by that whole scene outside Buddy's. Just what the Hell had happened?

My hypothesis generator kicked into high gear and started to spin out rough scenarios in my mind. Game #1: Rayno Turns Rat. He was pissed at me, yeah, that was it. Rayno was seriously pissed at me, and wanted to burn me truly bad, all because of old man Hansen's dumb stunt with the Honeywell. But Rayno was scared of me, too, 'cause he

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knew how good I was, so he'd gone straight to preemptive nuclear. The meeting at Buddy's was all just a ploy, a smokescreen so I'd be looking the other way when he set me up for—

For who? Nah, didn't click; cooperating with authority—any authority—wasn't Rayno's style. Granted, he had motivation, and the

circumstantials were there. But if Rayno'd wanted to teach me a lesson, he would've done something with a little more class, right?

Right?

The more I processed, the more that unanswered last question made my stomach churn. So I scratched the first scenario and popped the next one off my stack. Game #2: Paranoia. What if I was even better than I thought? What if, pure accidental, my hacking around CityNet had stirred up some real heavy attention —say, FBI, CIA, or the Cult of Cthulhu or something? And now I was being disappeared to a secret Army gulag where they were going to surgically remove my brain? And I was going to spend the rest of my life as a mess of loose eyeballs and brain tissue floating around in a big glass vat?

Oh, cool! I got a great twist in the gut from this one, 'cause it was so neat and total Krueger awful, but then the reality dampers slammed down. Come on, Mikey, the government? Get serious. We're talking about people who couldn't even find the Libyan Hacker Spies, and they had an office listed in the Washington D.C. phone directory. No way the government cybercops could've figured out what I was doing, much less caught me doing it. Unless, of course, Georgie's old man...

I looked around the plane again, scanned the nazis in the flat hats and green sportcoats. Nah, didn't checksum. What I'd done was break CityNet rules. CityNet Admin would have sent city cops to pick me up, and they would have kept me in town. Whoever was controlling this game was into serious overkill.

Which logical chained to, Game #3: Dad's Revenge. Okay, the uniforms were rented. The lear was a Fuji-DynaRand company jet. This was all some overblown scam Dad had cooked up; they were going to fly me around for a while and scare the bejeezus out of me, then land

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right back where we started, and I'd be so relieved to be back I'd kiss the ground and be the loyal and grateful son of House Harris forevermore. Yeah, this was the sort of thing Dad would cook up. I decided I might even let him think it'd worked, for a while.

Then a nervous voice in the back of my headspace started nagging me, saying, "What if you're wrong? What if this is really Game #4: Dad Finally Pulls the Plug On Mikey?"

I argued the voice down. I mean, Dad couldn't really be that pissed, could he? I'd backed up all his files. It wasn't like I'd truly hurt him or nothing. Pressing nose against window again, I tried one more time to get a confirm on where I was.

Bad news. My hometown is built in a valley. There's a river, flows right through the middle of it.

The place we were landing was built on a bay.

#

When the spinning in my head slowed up, I started to whip together a program. Okay, somebody—didn't matter who, I could verify the who part later—somebody had made me the site of a soon-to-be major-league dump. This had me upset some and scared a lot, but most of all it made me mad. I was gonna have to set up some maximum heavy duty revenge, once I got out of this mess. Once I got out, I'd...

But first, I needed to crash the program in a truly bad way.

After processing some, I decided the best path was to assume that everything I saw from here on was true/true. If it turned out this was some kind of mindgame Dad was playing with me, it'd still be worth crashing out. I flashed for a mo on how Dad would squirm and sweat while he was trying to explain to Mom how he'd lost her baby in some strange city, and let out half a smile. Little Mikey Harris was declaring war, and it made him feel a lot better.

So, next step? Orientation. I looked out the window again, tried to make a best guess at where we were landing. The light was getting better; the bay, I flagged, was more long and narrow that it'd looked at first. It opened out to the sea at the far right end. We banked around for a

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turn, and I saw snowcapped mountains off in the distance.

For a nano I flashed on the time Martin'd shown me a geography database some company was using to demo an artificial stupidity

program, and I wished I'd bothered to pirate it like he'd asked me to.

This was the exact sort of thing it was designed for. If only I had it in my Starfire and my hands weren't cuffed, I could—but never mind, I didn't and they were, so I couldn't.

Still, I have some pretty fair smarts in my unaugmented head. This was a rudimentary adventure problem, right?

The sun was rising behind us. It wasn't easy with the cuffs on, but I checked my watch. An0/ 8:17:40/ sunrise, in June? Okay, we were three hours behind my hometown, which put us somewhere on the west coast.

We were landing at a seaport on a long, narrow bay, near some snowy mountains, on the west coast. Nowhere came to mind immediate, so I started to commit some serious brains to the problem. As we banked around for our final approach I spotted SEATTLE painted on the roof of a bowling alley and that saved me a lot of work.

Okay, next step was to spec out an escape routine. My first idea was to wait until they took me inside the terminal building, then kick someone in the kneecap and start shouting, "Help! They're gonna make me a homo!" Gay bashing was a popular team sport again, so with any luck at all my keepers'd be so busy fighting off the Real Men they wouldn't be able to hang onto me. I'd wriggle away clean, zip over to a McRefuge, tell 'em I was an abused runaway. Tell 'em my old man liked to butter my buns, tell 'em these guys were part of a nationwide ring of ...

No good. I'd wind up doing three months' observation in the Social Disease lockup, and if I lived through that they'd hand me over to some bleedyheart social worker. I'd almost rather give in to Dad.

I popped the next idea off the stack. Seattle's a big town. It was sure to have a CityNet, and a cyberpunk scene. I was zeroed out for cash or plastic, but I did have my Starfire. If I could get loose for two minutes and find an open node—somewhere in this airport there had to be an

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open node—I could jack in, make some local contacts, and burn in a new set of friends fast. One of them'd reroute a smartcab for me; I'd get

out of the airport and get lost in the city, totally. Then, when I was sure I'd shaken off the gestapo, I'd log onto NationNet and zap a fax to Rayno. Rayno'd know what to do. He'd figure out a way to get me home.

Assuming, of course, that he wasn't the one who'd put me here in the first place. If I was wrong, and we really were running some variation on Game Scenario #1...

I decided to block this part of the plan to another folder and rethink it some more later.

Once I'd reduced the algorithm to Escape!, everything else was sudden hardwired clear. Geez, it was sharp and simple! I kicked it over a few more times, and each time it looked more and more like a truly great plan. Escape! Find a node. Jack into the local cyberpunk scene. Go underground. Maybe I could even hang around Seattle a few extra weeks, to get Mom real pissed at Dad. I started to feel truly derzky, thinking about all the great tricks and treats I'd show my new Seattle friends. If I played this right I could be NetMaster to a whole city of cyberpunks! I was feeling so derzky I could hardly stand it!

Trouble was, there was just one little bug in the program. It was all hanging on the hope that my keepers would give me a chance.

Soon as we landed, we taxied over to a great big green quonset hangar a good half mile from the terminal building. With a little skritch of brakes we jerked to a stop alongside a creaky old wreck of a propengined airbus, and then the turbines whined down to silence and my keepers were up and moving. Grim, wordless, one grabbed hold of my collar and upper arm and pinned me rigid, while the other one reached across and popped my seatbelt latch. Then, like I weighed almost nothing at all, the guy on my arm hoisted me rough to my feet, while someone outside the plane unsealed the hatch and cracked the lock. The hatch opened with a slow, lazy, gas-strut kind of hiss.

The gestapos pinned my arms to my sides, dragged me out of the

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lear, and marched me straight up the boarding ramp at the nose of the prop plane. There was a guy waiting for us at the top of the ramp; he

looked like a cross between a small tank and a real ugly pit bull, and even ten feet away he smelled like a river of sweat. Short, muscle-tight, his face a gritty hash of old acne scars—in other words, a classic secondary symptoms roidal, an old steroid addict—

Correction: An old ex-addict. There's no such as an old active roidal.

I looked at this guy at the top of the ramp, and my heart hit my shoes and I just about gagged. I'd met his kind plenty of times before, both on video and in the analog. Ever since third grade they'd been warning us about them. The roidals who don't die fighting to compensate for their micropenises wind up as public school gym teachers, usual, checking out the teenage boys in the locker room and looking for new deltoids to pump up. That's how roidals reproduce, I'm told.

The human vise holding my left arm turned to the Incredible Living Steroid and said, "Thanks for waiting."

"No problems," Roidan the Flying Monster growled in answer. "I'd rather hold the plane than get 'em after you've been sitting on 'em for a week."

"The parents contracted for an off-the-street grab," the vise on my right said. "This one's still pretty disoriented."

"I prefer 'em that way."

Wrong, bozo, I wasn't disoriented, I was in Total Shock mode.

Parents? You mean like both parents?

"Here's his suitcase," a third gestapo—probably the pilot of the lear—added, as he came up the ramp and threw Mom's old green tourister through the hatch. "And here's his paperwork." He handed over a thick brown envelope. Roidan looked down as he took the envelope, and for just a mo a little snicker ran across his face. "What's so funny?" the gestapo on my right asked.

"Look at his shoes," Captain Steroid whispered. The gestapo looked at my blitz yellow hightops and started to smirk, but then Roidan cleared

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his throat and the gestapo snapped to rigid attention.

Satisfied that no one was having a good time, the roidal pulled some papers out of the brown envelope and, for surprisers, started reading. (I half expected him to just chew them up.) While he was looking over the paperwork I took a good long minute to look him over. Then I scrapped every last hope I had of breaking loose in Seattle.

The guys on the lear had looked sour and hard. The Incredible Living Steroid was short—about two inches taller'n me, which is short for an Older, but another typical secondary symptom—and total toughlooking. Shaved head. No neck I could see. Shoulders just crawly with muscles. Muscles that bulged and popped when he nodded his head; muscles that stood out angular when he tried to form any other expression on his angry red face. Each one of his biceps was about as big around as my waist.

As the image bits clicked in and the total picture formed, I flagged he was wearing a different uniform, too, from the guys on the lear: Green suede 'n' goretex boots, and a camo jumpsuit with big sweat stains around the armpits and the name Payne black-stenciled on a green strip over his right breast pocket. Another minute of watching him read, and I decided he had the sleeves of his jumpsuit rolled up. All those tattoos made it hard to tell.

Oh, great. They were throwing me on a plane with Attila the Scout Troop Leader. Just fritzing great.

"Harris?" he said soft, not looking up. Tiny beads of sweat sparkled on his tan, nubbly scalp. I didn't answer. Maybe I couldn't fight what was happening right at the mo, but I was damned and determined not to cooperate with it.

"Harris?" he asked again.

"Whadayawant?" I said, in my best sullen punkspeak.

"You will address me as sir," he said, looking up at last.

"Sir Payne?" I said, sarcastic to the max.

"Oh," he said gentle, "so we're a smartass, are we?"

"Well, sir -- "

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“DID I GIVE YOU PERMISSION TO SPEAK?” Spit flew when he bellowed, and his face turned three shades of darker red. My sullen routine was blown away, of course. By the time I got the cringe out of my neck I didn’t know whether to answer, shake my head, keep silent, or just crap in my pants.

Payne tucked my papers under his left arm, started cracking his knuckles and making experimental fists, and looked my face over like he was trying to pick the exact best spot to hit me. Then he gave me a look that said I was the most disgusting thing he’d ever smelled in his entire life, and growled, “Get inside. Sit down. Shut up.” The gestapo on my left popped the cablecuffs off, and the one on the right turned me loose with a shove. Payne helped me into the plane with his boot. While I was picking myself up from off my suitcase, all three gestapos from the lear skittered down the ramp, and Payne lifted the ramp and pulled it inside. With one hand.

Inside the plane it was dark, but after a few seconds my eyes started to adjust and I began picking out faces. Good, at least I wasn’t going into this alone. There were thirty-five, maybe forty other people in the cabin; as my eyes adjusted even better I started to flag they were all guys about my age, and none of them were there by choice, either. ‘Cause, well...

Row One: We had a stringy-haired chemhead sitting next to a fossil gearhead greaser, across the aisle from two McPunks in standard-issue electric blue mohawks. Row Two: Three vidiots gone Tommy (deaf, dumb, and blind) with their earcorks in, videoshades on, and beltclip vidplayers going, next to a comikaze with his nose buried in a DynaBook. (The guy who figured out how to make half-animated comic book ROMs play on standard school DynaBooks must have made a fortune.)

Row Three: One very squeamly looking Style Statement wimp with perfect hair, surrounded by a bunch of horse-maned slammers in studs and black leather. Row Four: Two Little Hitlers exchanging hot glares with two Butthole Skinheads, because the Hitlers had only jackboots on

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their feet and swastikas tattooed on their foreheads, while the Buttholes had genuine Doc Marten "Clydesdale" boots and little blue totenkopf tattoos they'd carved in themselves. Row Five ...

Get the idea? Put that mix on the transys and you get Instant Gang Fight. But here on the plane they were all sitting quiet, hands in their laps, looking so depressed I wondered if the chemhead was treating everyone to megahits of Blotter Suicide. Even the McPunks were quiet (hard to believe, I know). One hugged his boombox like it was a baby doll; the other did a little furtive tapping on the drumpads of his Casio keyboard. But what made it weird was their gear was turned off. Not just down; off. I started working up the nerve to open a commline and then felt hot breath on the back of my neck.

"Move back!" Payne yelled, giving me a friendly kick to indicate direction. "Find a seat!" he added, giving me a cheerful kick to indicate what I should put in the seat when I found it. I picked up Mom's green tourister suitcase and started stumbling down the aisle. About the sixth row, it hit me. Cold and sudden, I knew why the punks and flakes were observing a truce. I knew soon's I saw the haircuts.

Or rather, soon's I saw all those white scalps showing through all those flattops.

The back half of the plane was packed with smiling, nauseatingly confident young guys dressed in camo. Camo shirts, camo pants, camo jackets—I bet they had camo underwear. From the feet sticking out in the aisle I could see they had camo boots. There I was, standing at the front of their section in my blue spatterzag jumpsuit, blitz yellow hightop tennies, and horsemane hair, feeling like a fatal error flag, and they all just looked at me.

Then one of them started to giggle. Then another, and another, and just about the time I was starting to really wonder what was so God Damned Funny one of them finally spoke to me. He drawled, "Hey boy, where'd y'all get them shoes?"

For a long minute I wished I could just melt and ooze out through the floor. But the last couple empty seats were in their section, so I

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finally gritted my teeth, picked up my suitcase, and started walking. Soon as I started moving again my shoes must have turned invisible, ‘cause all the jarheads very deliberately Didn’t Look at me. They went back to whatever it was they were doing, and I got down the aisle without too much trouble. But the crap about my shoes had me burning, so I just kept staring at their heads. Flattops. Geez, every single one of them had the fritzin’ Lance Stallone cut! I was stuck on a plane with a bunch of kids who’d not only seen Managua Blood, they’d identified with that pathetic slab of revisionist history!

Just back of the wing there was an open seat on my left, next to a freckled kid with a semi-friendly expression on his face and the name “D.K. Luger” stenciled on his shirt. I wrestled my suitcase up to the baggage rack, wedged it in between all the camo duffel bags, flopped into the seat. The freckled kid scanned me over a few seconds, then offered a handshake and drawled, “Hi, I’m -- “

“Don’t talk to him, Deke,” someone behind us hissed. “He’s an Involuntary.” D.K. Luger got embarassed, pulled his hand back, and turned to look out the window.

“Aw, c’mon Deke,” I said. (Actual, I whined it, just like Georgie.) “Ten hours ago my olders crashed me and stuck me on a lear. Okay, so I’m an Involuntary. Can you cancel that for a nano and—”

“Cryminelly,” the kid behind us grumbled. “We got us’ns a cyberpunk.”

I cancelled the hot retort and tried again in Ultra CleanSpeak.

“Deke, could you please tell me where we’re going?”

“To Pleasure Island!” Payne shouted in my left ear, damn near startling me into the luggage rack. “Where we turn naughty boys like you into jackasses!” I uncringed my neck again and turned around to look at him. For a flash, Payne’s face softened a little, maybe. “And once in a great while we turn jackasses into decent men,” he added.

The softness flashed off. He spun around, walked up to the front of the plane, went into the pilot’s compartment. A second later, one of the engines made a chunk! and a whine and started turning over. Soon’s it

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caught, they fired up the other. Two minutes later we were rattling out onto the runway, and five minutes after that we were groaning into the air.

When we finished climbing and banking the sun was shining straight in Deke's window. Okay, we were going north. The sunlight bugged Deke, so he closed the shade, pulled an analog book out of the camo gym bag (also stenciled D.K. Luger) beneath his seat, and buried his freckled nose in reading. I tried to look around for somebody else to talk to, but nobody'd look me in the face. By and by, my stomach started reminding me that it was expecting breakfast.

Great. I was hungry. I was tired. I was cold, now that Deke had closed the shade. And I was flying into Canada with a bunch of depressed punks and twenty junior jarheads who were treating me like a total zero.

I didn't have a clear idea yet of what I was gonna do to Dad when I got back, but it was gonna be good.

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Chapter 0/ 8

After the bleary eyes wore off, most of the jarheads started to get real chatty. I managed to tap part-way into a couple of the conversations going on around me—the engine noise put some garble in everything, but I caught enough to make sense—and I picked up we were going to someplace called The Academy. With capital letters. I also learned that, while none of the kids had actually been There before, a few had friends or older brothers who'd gone last summer.

I detensioned a little. So it was a summer camp. Not a life sentence. Further, the story going around was that the friends/ brothers had had nothing but non-stop fun at The Academy. Just when I started to think this might be worth an actual look forward, I picked up that fun meant exercise, drilling, and playing soldier. Jarheads define things weird, I decided. When the kids in front of me started talking about war

games at The Academy I tried to crack in and tell ‘em all about my Battle of Peshawar program, but they clammed and pretended not to hear me.

Okay, if that’s the way they wanted it, I could go into silent mode for awhile. Their idea of war gaming sounded pretty lame, anyway.

Around 11:0/ 7:0/0/ , Deke lifted the shade again. Then he reached down and pulled a sandwich out of his bag: Bologna on Wonder—not something I’d eat, normal—but I was starting to get real concious that it’d been 17 hours since my last meal, and I’d have eaten a dead mouse on rye if he’d had one and offered to share it. Never taking his eyes off his book, Deke unwrapped the sandwich and started to munch it, slow. I watched him until it was gone. I watched his cheeks pouch out and his jaw grind; I watched every crumb that fell into the book. I chewed my nails and tried to get up the nerve to beg half of it off him.

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No, cancel that. I needed to make a friend out of somebody on that plane, and I’d already made Deke squirm once. Pushing myself in D.K. Luger’s face was not gonna make it any better. Derzky was how I needed to be. I’d be derzky, I’d be smart. I wouldn’t push him. He’d loosen up.

About the time he finished the sandwich, the plane started nosing down and the wheels groaned into landing position. Still trying to keep cool, I casual looked around Deke and got a peek out the window. All I could see was big trees, small lakes, and more trees. No roads, no houses, no smokestacks; nothing but tall pine trees coming up fast. Just when I was starting to do a little worry about whether this landing was planned, I saw a bunch of plowed fields flash by the window and then we set down in a clearing.

Or maybe it was another plowed field. We hit the ground, bounced hard, hit the ground again. The pilot reversed engines, braking us, and I kept looking out the window, trying to get some idea of what The Academy looked like. Still nothing but trees.

When we’d almost stopped rolling, I finally saw some buildings: A pathetic little shack covered with camo netting, a couple green

corrugated tin sheds that might've been hangars. I didn't get more of a look, though, 'cause that was when Payne stuck his face into the passenger compartment and yelled, "Plane's on fire! Clear and take cover! Now!"

The jarheads went crazy. I would've too, if my brain hadn't been running on five-second delay. Sudden, everybody was up and clawing for their stuff. Deke pulled the gym bag out from under his seat, climbed over me to get his duffel bag off the overhead rack, knocked my suitcase down. Missed my head by about two inches. The plane stopped moving; the propellors stopped turning. Someone popped the front and rear hatches, and then it registered.

Jesus Mary and Joseph FIRE? Most of the other kids were already compressed into two tight jams around the front and rear hatches; looked like the Ticketron booth the day Stag Preston tickets went on sale.

Someone near me got a bright idea and popped the emergency exit over

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the wing. I hesitated a second, then got a good grip on Mom's suitcase and dove through.

Just for laughs, sometime, find yourself a nice big slab of aluminum and jump on it, face first. They make it look so easy on video.

I lost hold of the suitcase, of course; it went sliding down the wing and I went rolling after it. The suitcase and I flipped off the back edge of the wing together. It bounced one way and I bounced the other, but together we put a pretty good dent in the ground. When my headchips reseated themselves in their sockets, I flagged everybody was running for the woods like they were being chased by a pack of LowerTown rollerbladers, so I decided I'd look for the charred remains of the suitcase later. Stumble-running after the jarheads, totally expecting to feel a blast of flames behind me at any second, I reached the edge of the airstrip, closed my eyes, and dove headfirst into the weeds.

Silence.

Incredible, awesome silence. I could almost feel my ears growing, as they struggled to grab some audio they recognized. The first sound that soaked through to my brain was my own heavy breathing.

Then a nervous young whisper or two. Then birds chattering up in the treetops; a rustle of wind seeping through green leaves. Some kind of insect buzzing by, slow, droning, and erratic, like it was flying drunk. A minute or two more and I realized the plane was continuing to not explode, so I opened my eyes and looked back. Payne had lowered the boarding ladder, and he and the pilot were taking a nice, leisure stroll towards the camo net-covered shack. There wasn't any fire. There wasn't even any smoke. I remembered the thing Payne had said back in Seattle about liking to keep us disoriented, and fed that to the inference engine in my head. It kicked out the idea that this was going to be one long summer. If I didn't get out.

The pilot went into the shack and started talking to someone. Payne stayed outside and brayed, "Fall in!" When the jarheads and most of the punks had trotted over he looked straight at me and shouted, "Are you waiting for an invitation, pissant? Or do you like lying in poison ivy?"

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Poison ivy? Oh, just fritzing terrific.

Slow, gingerish, trying not to touch one more leaf than I absolute had to, I started getting up out of the weeds. Payne turned back to the rest and began barking out orders. "Ten-shun! For mup! By twos! Rye face!" All that kind of military babble stuff. A couple seconds later most everybody had collected their bags and gone trotting off down a jeep trail into the woods, except for me and the two McPunks. I was just standing there, wondering what the Hell I was 'sposed to do about poison ivy now that I'd been lying in it, and trying to figure out how cooperative I felt. The McPunks were staring at the rutted, weedy dirt trail, and fondling the wheels of their skateboards.

One of them started giggling. The other one got a fierce scowl on his face and punched the giggler on the shoulder, but that just made him giggle harder. He kept building up, and building up, until finally he was laughing and howling like he'd gone full-blown nutzoid. Then he took a big spinning windup and threw his skateboard off into the trees just as hard as he could throw it.

The other one stared at him a minute longer, then shrugged, grinned, and followed suit. Laughing Boy settled down long enough to program his Casio for a funky marching rhythm, and then the two of them started off after Payne and the rest.

Since I didn't have any better ideas, I walked over to the plane, picked up Mom's suitcase, reset the mileage counter in my right shoe, and followed them.

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Up and down, twisting and turning through the deep shadowy woods, the trail wound on. And on. And on. Around .27 miles, I noticed that my suitcase was getting real heavy. That, and Payne and the rest of the kids were moving a lot faster than I was. I'd already lost sight of the group; even the Style Statement wimp who was bringing up the rear. (How he ever managed to move that fast in those shoes, I don't know).

At .56 miles, I started to flash on them all being in on the scam. Yeah, that was it. Dad had paid them all off. They'd flown me up here just to ditch me in the woods, and now they were back at the plane, laughing hysterical.

At 1.12 miles, I came out of the woods and into The Academy.

The basic layout was a bunch of long, low, prefab buildings lining the sides of a big rectangular field. The forest came right up to my end of the field; at the other end they'd stacked a mess of the prefabs to make a vaguely high-schoolish looking building. There was also a sort of reviewing stand or something out in front of the big building, with two flagpoles, a Canadian flag, and a U.S. flag even bigger than the one at Perkins. Something bothered me about that, and I kept looking at those two flags until I traced it down.

The flags were the only splash of bright color in the whole scene. The sky was a kind of a washed out pale blue, with the occasional fluffy white cloud scattered around. The woods were a lush, deep, mottled green, tall pine trees stretching on forever. The underbrush came right up to the edge of the Academy, like a thick, dark green wall. The grass

on the field was cropped short and sunburned a greenish-tan; the buildings were green, the reviewing stand was green, every damn rock and garbage can was painted green. There must have been two hundred guys around the buildings or out on the field, and every single fritzin'

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one of them was dressed head-to-toe in green!

Except for two electric blue mohawks at the tail end of a line going into a large, low building. I walked over and rejoined my group.

Step by step, we filed slow into the building. The McPunk who'd done all the laughing was still in Sputter 'n' Snicker mode so he wasn't much use, but after awhile I got the other one talking. Turned out his name was Scott Nordstrom, and he was from Iowa or Illinois or someplace with an I like that.

"How'd you wind up here?" I asked him. He ejected the CD from his boombox and handed it to me. Angina Pectoris: The bimbette who'd made the tatterblouse famous. I'd never thought much of her music, but Lisa really grooved on the image. "So?"

Scott shrugged. "My folks are like, Springsteen dweebs, y'know? I mean, Big Time. Souvenir decanters, paintings on black velvet, the whole bit. Like we even went to Asbury Park for our vacation last year. Christ, it was a pilgrimage."

"So?"

"So we mixed it up the other night, y'know? I'm listening to Diamonds from the Veldt, and they start getting on my jammy about how Angie is so yoko, total trash, and all the rest of that metal, y'know? Then they go into the usual spew about how I should be listening to some Genuine Boss and getting in sync with the working classes."

"Sounds familiar," I said. I'd lucked out. My olders had never had it that bad. They'd just collected every version of Born to Run ever recorded.

Scott pointed to the CD label. "So I program my boombox to be playing track #3 ninety-nine times in a row. Then I crank it to def volume, lock it in their bedroom closet with all the sweetleaf plants, and

leave the house." He smiled. "I take the closet key with me."

I looked at the disk. Track #3 was, Brucie B Dead (And I Glad He Gone). I handed the CD back to Scott. "No sense of humor, huh?"

Scott shrugged. "I expected them to get messed, y'know, but they smoked their voice coils! I was hanging out in front of Mickey D's with

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my homeboys when eight sides of bacon rolled up in their stymobiles, and we all wound up spending the night in the drooler's lockup. The boys got out the next morning, but my dad refused to take the call. Max dweeb!"

Scott calmed down. "It took the bacon a week to get my folks to admit they were my folks, and by that time Dad'd jammed through the academy admit. I went straight from Vagrant Heaven to the airport, to some private slammer in Seattle. My luggage caught up with me there. My folks sent along some clothes, my skateboard, my boombox." Scott took the Angie Pectoris disk back from me. "And one CD."

I started to mumble something sympathetic, but he threw me an interrupt.

"You want to know what's really yoko?" Scott blurted. "Listen!" He cranked up the boombox's volume control and started spinning through the FM dial. "Zippo, man. Flat nothing!" He shut the boombox off. "I don't know what state Canada is in, but we are a zillion miles from anywhere I want to be." By this time we'd shuffled up to the door of the shed. Scott turned to step inside.

"The Von Schlager Military Academy," he grumbled. "Hah! They should call it Absolute Fuggin' Nowhere."

A little flag went up in my head. "Break! A nano back you said— Scott, you know something about this place?"

He turned back to me, surprised. "Don't—? Uh, sure. Like you never heard of the Von Schlager Military Academy?" I shook my head. "Oh, bummer. Look, dude, this place is def bad. I don't mean 'baaad,' I mean bad. I mean, the Fundies don't send their kids here, 'cause they don't like the way they think when they get out. Even the Posse don't send their kids here." A look of big concern took hold of Scott's face.

He pointed to himself. “It’s like, I’m not worried about myself, ‘cause I am so together, y’know? But if you’re going into this cold blind ... ,” he shook his head and frowned.

I grabbed his sleeve. “Scott, you gotta tell me—”

“Will you two wimps kindly get your candy asses in here?”

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Somebody grabbed hold of Scott’s other arm and dragged him inside. I got pulled along in the cavitation.

The room was small, windowless, and dusty hot airless. Four big kids, maybe sixteen or seventeen years old, were standing just inside the door. One grabbed Scott’s suitcase as he came in and ran with it out the door on the other side of the room. Another grabbed Scott’s boombox and threw it on a folding table, while a third started going over Scott’s body with an airport detex. The fourth one—a big, red-haired guy with a face like a pepperoni pizza—just stood back and looked mean.

“Hey dudes,” Scott said, as boombox batteries went rolling all over the floor, “this is not cool.”

Nobody answered. The guy who’d taken the boombox pulled out a screwdriver and started cracking open the case.

“Hey, man! You’re wrecking my tunes machine!” Scott started to move, but Pizza Face stepped forward.

“‘Hey, man!’,” Pizza Face said, on maximum mock. “We won’t break your ‘tunes machine’.” He smiled, nasty, and added, “We let your bunkies do that.”

“Relax,” the guy with the screwdriver said, a little friendlier. “I’m just checking for contraband.”

“Riiight!” Scott said, all smiles. “ContraBand. I heard of them; salsa group out of Miami, right?” Nobody smiled.

“Well, he’s clean for metal,” the guy with the detex said, “but the sniffer’s picking up something.” He waved the loop around Scott a few more times, then announced, “D-Lysergic. Right front pants pocket.”

Scott never had time to react. Neat and businesslike, the two inspectors dropped their tools and pinned his arms, while Pizza Face

reached into Scott's pocket and pulled out his handkerchief. "Hey dude,"

Scott said, "if you needed to blow your nose, you just hadda ask."

Pizza Face whipped out this enormous thing that looked like a cross

between a Bowie Knife and a ripsaw and split the kerchief along one

seam. The kerchief turned out to be made of two sheets of thin fabric,

with a thick layer of soft white paper in between. "Oh, crud," Scott said,

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quiet. Pizza Face sheathed the knife, pulled a plastic lighter out of his

shirt pocket, and fired it up. When Scott realized what was happening,

he made one more desperate lunge to break free. They had him solid.

Fighting was getting nowhere, so Scott tried talking. "Hey look,

dude. That's five hundred dollars worth of really def blotter there. Let

me go and I'll have my homeboys put some maximum 'roids in the next

load. You look like a dude who'd appreciate some really fine 'roids."

Slowly, Pizza Face brought the lighter to the paper. He was enjoying

this.

"No, really, I'll get you top drawer shit," Scott said. "Make you feel

like Rambo."

Pizza Face touched the flame to the edge of the blotter.

Scott started to cry. "C'mon, dude! I traded my Casio for that!"

Pizza Face smiled at him. "Toughski shitski. From now on, you go

straightedge. Everybody here goes straightedge." The flames enveloped

the blotter. Scott just stood there, watching and whimpering, until it was

all gone.

They let go of him, and the guy with the detex made one more pass.

"Clean," he announced. The other guy collected all the pieces of the

boombox and handed them over, and they pushed Scott through the door

at the other end of the room.

Pizza Face turned around, smiling. "And now for you."

Don't misunderstand; I was still in orientation mode, looking sharp

for an escape hatch, and not at all interested in being cooperative. Only,

this didn't seem like a good place to prove it, y'know? When Pizza Face

moved forward I stood total still, raised my hands slow. The baggage

guy came back into the room and ran off with Mom's suitcase. Pizza Face took a step back and let the other two guys start working me over with the detex. Honest, I was trying my best to ride out the flow! Until the detex beeped as it went over the inside pocket holding my Starfire, and the scanners dropped their tools and pinned my arms to my sides.

Maybe it was 'cause I was fierce hungry. Maybe it was 'cause I was

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burned-out tired. Maybe it was 'cause I had this horrible flash forward of ham-hands with the screwdriver trying to take apart my Starfire, or maybe it was 'cause I'd spent most of the last 24 hours getting my arms pinned by various kinds of gestapo and I was just real tired of being grabbed like that. Anyway, Pizza Face came swaggering over, saying, "Let's see what he's got, shall we?," and reaching for my jumpsuit zipper.

Then he stopped cold, looked down, cracked a smirk—

"Not again," I whispered.

Pizza Face grabbed my chin, tilted my head back so he could look me right in the eye, and smiled nasty. "What happened, boy?" he asked, quiet. "Some dog mistake your feet for a tree?"

That did it! I stomped down hard on somebody's instep; I wriggled, I kicked, I spun; I don't know how I did it but suddenly I was free and looking straight down my arm as my skinny fist zeroed right in on Pizza Face's big zit-covered nose! I think I even screamed something fierce right out of Seven Blades for the Dragon!

I don't know how Pizza Face did it, either. All I know is that one moment my fist was six inches away from his nose and dead on course, and then a nano later I was punching empty air. Pizza Face grabbed my wrist as it went past, helped my spin along with a tug, gave me a sidefoot kick in the back of the knee.

What I do know is that it hurt. A lot. I started to go down. He put more pressure on my knee to make sure I kept going. When I could focus again I was lying on the floor, flat on my back, and Pizza Face was

crouching over me. I could see his nametag, clear. His name was

Rogers. Roid Rogers.

Rogers kneeled down, so he could shove his left shoulder in my

face, and growled, “Cute stunt, candy-ass.” His face was turning bright

red, making his zits look like sunspots on Betelgeuse. I tried to get up.

He pushed me back down again, hard.

“You see this, candy ass?” he said, pointing at the knotted black

cord stuck on his shoulder. “This means I’m a Cadet, Grade Four. You

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know what that means? It means I can beat the piss out of you any time I

feel like it.”

“Hey Rogers,” the guy with the detex was saying, “ease up on the

kid, okay?”

“And now, to make sure that you remember this lesson,” Rogers

growled, leaving the sentence hanging in the air. He made a fist with his

right hand, drew it back like a pinball launcher, and gave me one last

evil smile.

“Cadet Rogers,” Payne said in a loud, deep voice. I didn’t know he’d

come into the room. Neither, apparently, had Rogers. He let his fist drop,

stood, and turned, hangdog, to face Payne.

“Yessir?”

“Are you having a problem handling this recruit, Rogers?”

“Nossir.”

“Very well. Proceed.” Payne crossed his arms and made it clear he

planned to stay in that room a good long time. Rogers turned back to me,

deep anger smoking in his eyes.

“The detex operator has found a suspect article,” he said. “Will you

surrender it voluntarily?” After a mo, I realized he was talking to me.

I thought it over, brief. “Sure.” I reached down into my inside

pocket and pulled out the Starfire. Didn’t take real genius to see that if I

was going to get it and myself out of the room in one piece, it’d be while

Payne was watching.

Ham-hands took it from me. He flipped up the wafer display,

unfolded the keyboard, and turned it over. “It appears to be a pocket

calculator," he told Rogers. He opened the battery door, saw the ni-cads soldered in place, and closed it again. "Harmless."

Rogers stayed silent a minute too long. "Is this a contraband item?" Payne prompted, loud.

"Nossir," Rogers answered, looking at the ceiling like he was so bored. "Weapons, drugs, and pornography are contraband, sir."

"And what do we do with items that are not contraband?"

"All other items are to be respected as the cadet's personal property,

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sir."

"Very good, Cadet Rogers. I'll take him from here." Ham-hands returned my Starfire, and I walked shaky out the doorway on the other side of the room and into a hallway. Payne followed, and closed the door behind us.

I know, I know, I should have been derzky, sullen. Sometimes it's just a little hard to keep the gratitude thing choked down, y'know? In the hallway I stopped, turned. "Thanks, Mr. Payne—sir! I thought sure he was... "

Payne grabbed me by the front of my jumpsuit and held me two inches off his nose. "Look here, pissant," he growled, "you know why I stopped Rogers? Because beating you up is my job!" He slammed me against the wall. "Now get your ass in gear, pissant! You're late!" With a kick, he got me started down the hallway. Then he went back into the room where Rogers was and started into some major yelling.

I got my ass in gear. The next stop down the hallway was the storeroom, where they fit me out with some ugly, baggy, flat-green clothes, some heavy black boots that lost their shine the instant I touched them, and a toothbrush and soap and all that. They let me keep my jumpsuit, though, and my watch and my Starfire, but near as I could tell Mom's green tourister suitcase —and whatever was in it—got vaporized.

After that came the haircut; they hauled out the hedge trimmers, and my black horsemane hit the floor right next to a pile of electric blue

spikes. Then they took all our clothes back again, and ran us through some icewater showers, and we got a cursory scan from the camp doctor, who made sure we were all not crawling with bugs and still breathing at least some of the time. And then...

By the time we finally got to the mess hall, the Little Hitlers had had their swastika tattoos laser-bleached out, the Butthole Skinheads had lost their steel-toed boots and suspenders, and me, Scott, the other McPunk, and the Style Statement boy had all been shaved bald. This had me burning, until I saw the Lance Stallone clones.

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They were shaved bald, too, and they'd traded in their pricey camo gore-tex and designer boots for the same ugly flat-greens the rest of us were wearing. There is justice in the universe.

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Chapter 0/A

Lunch, when we got it, was this shredded, pink, meatlike substance drowned in some kind of lumpy white sauce or gravy, ladled over a slab of soggy brown toast, with some runny orange mush that might have been carrots once on the side and a chocolate brownie about the size of my thumbnail for desert. By the time I got through the serving line everyone else was sitting down and making with lots of real gross jokes about what the stuff looked like and what it should be called, but I didn't care. I was hungry, and I ate it, and it wasn't half bad. So I asked Scott if I could trade him my brownie for his plateful, and he said okay, which got a couple guys calling me Disposal Breath, but I got a kind of feeble last laugh on them 'cause they were all still pushing it around their plates and flipping forkfuls of it at each other when Payne came charging into the mess hall and brayed, "Fall in!"

The jarheads jumped to their feet. I figured they knew what they were doing so I jumped, too. Scott was too obvious being casual about getting up, so Payne grabbed him by the back of his shirt, hauled him to his feet, and sort of launched him overhand in the general direction of

the group.

Everyone else fell in real fast.

“Ten-shun! Rye face! Ford harch!” I watched the jarheads again and faked the motions okay. We went tromping out of the mess hall—

“HALT!” The line jerked to a stop, bodies colliding, people falling down. I looked around to see what the glitch was and flagged some poor kid back at the end of the line had tried to drop out and snag a public domain brownie. He was standing over by a table, frozen like a statue, the brownie in his hand and the most guilty look I have ever seen on his face.

Payne glared at the kid like he was trying to melt him down by psi.

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“You! Pissant! Front and center!”

The kid turned around, face drooping, and shuffled over to stand in front of Payne. “Ten-shun!” The kid snapped rigid. Payne’s face went a shade darker. “You call that attention?” The kid tried again, squeezing so tight I thought his eyeballs would pop.

Hands on his hips, angry red scowl on his bulldog face, Payne did an orbit about the kid, looking him up, looking him down, down, down. Stopped walking. Bulled in six inches away from his face. “What’s your name, pissant?”

“Lester Jankowicz,” the kid mumbled.

Payne snapped forward like a striking snake. Two inches. “Lester Jankowicz WHAT?”

“Lester Jankowicz, sir.” Now that I’d been looking at him awhile, I flagged he was the stringy-haired chemhead I saw on the turboprop. Funny, he didn’t look so flakey and skeletal thin now that he was shaved bald and wearing baggy greens.

Payne smiled a little, backed off. “So, Jankowicz, you like chocolate?”

Jankowicz relaxed, shrugged, grinned idiotic. “Yes, sir. Like I kinda got the munchies, if you know—”

Payne exploded. “Your name is not Lester Jankowicz! From now on

your name is Piggy!" Jankowicz' lopsided grin collapsed like his face was made of melting Play-Doh. Payne bored in for the kill, his voice low and mean. "Now, what is your name, pissant?"

"Les—," Jankowicz froze. His voice dropped to near whisper. "Uh, Piggy, sir."

"What's that?"

Jankowicz closed his eyes, fought back what looked like the start of tears, raised his voice. "Piggy, sir!"

"Very good!" Payne looked around, spotted two Grade Fours, waved them over and pointed to Jankowicz. "Piggy here wants to finish all of the leftover brownies. You will see that he does." The Grade Fours saluted crisp, snapped out their 'yessirs' is perfect sync, took Jankowicz

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by the arms and led him off. Then Payne turned back to the rest of us. "Ten-shun! Rye face! Ford harch!"

In the confusion, Scott managed to position himself behind me in the line. "D'ja see that, dude?" he whispered. "They're gonna make Piggy eat all the leftover brownies. If that's torture, chain me to the wall!"

I shook my head, just a twitch. "I dunno, Scott. This Payne character's more subtle than he looks."

"Still, dude, you just watch me tonight at supper—"

"Will you two shut up?" the guy behind Scott whispered. "You wanna get us all in trouble?"

I was still processing my answer to that when Payne came quickmarching by, giving us all the hairy eyeball.

#

We marched out of the mess hall, down the track and around the end of the field, up along a row of identical ugly green prefab bunkhouses, eventual coming to a stop in front of one. Which was good, 'cause by then Scott was starting to make with little robot 'boop' and 'beep' noises and Payne looked like he was getting suspicious. Payne called out "Column halt!" and we sort of piled to a stop. He yelled "Ten-shun!" and we all snapped to. He clasped hands behind his back and walked down the line slow, looking us over with a cold, unreadable glare. At the

end of the line he turned around, stopped. Took a deep breath.

“Welcome to the Von Schlager Military Academy!” he boomed out.

“As of this second, your old life is over! I don’t care who you were yesterday, or what you did before you came here! Starting right now, you are Serial Two-Oh-Three! You are a team! And in the next twelve weeks we are going to teach you a little bit about what it means to be a team of men!” He paused, looked down, bit his lower lip.

“This bunkhouse is your new home! Bunks and bedding are inside, as are cleaning supplies. It is up to you to make Serial Two-Oh-Three’s bunkhouse spotless! Inspection will be at sixteen hundred hours, with official orientation to begin immediately thereafter!” He paused again, took another deep breath.

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“So tell me, who are you?”

A couple of us started to mumble our discrete names, but all the jarheads together yelled out, “Serial Two-Oh-Three!”

“What’s that?”

A little better sync this time. “Serial Two-Oh-Three.”

“I can’t hear you!”

Geez, even I joined in. “Serial Two-Oh-Three!”

Payne leaned back a little, grinned or maybe bared his teeth, cracked off a salute like a karate chop. “Dis mist!” Pivoting on a heel, he turned and marched away. The jarheads broke into a mad scramble for the bunkhouse door.

Me and Scott sagged, turned slow, looked at each other with big dumb surprise playing all over our faces. “That’s it?” I said, all total amazement. “We’re free?” Okay Mikey, at last, some space to think!

Let’s start working on the escape plan!

Step one: Get my Starfire back, and find an open node, and jack in, and... and what? Just where the Hell am I, anyway?

Step one, revised: Figure out which trail leads out to the highway, and...

I looked around the field. Trees. Tall pine trees, stretching on

forever. Underbrush like a thick green wall, coming right up to the edge of the Academy.

Right. Step one, rev 3.0/ : Find a road, or trail, or something.

I was still hacking through permutations on step one when the light bulb flashed on over Scott's head.

"Bunk beds!"

Shiite! He took off running; I followed, but too late. By the time we figured out there was a back door and went around that way, all the bottom bunks were taken, and most of the top ones, too. Scott wound up with an upper bunk over by the back windows—well, they weren't windows, really; more like big rectangular holes in the walls, with mosquito netting on the inside and heavy wooden shutters on the outside, propped open with sticks—and I got the upper bunk just inside

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the front door, right over some sullen, silent guy with an oily dark complexion and a big nose. There was this major notch in the bunk frame where the door hit every time it swung open.

That was the least of my problems. Fact is, calling that thing a bed was pure pravda. Torture rack, more likely; made out of slick greenpainted two-by-fours; slapped together with big Frankenstein-type bolt heads sticking out all over; no spring, no mattress, no nothing, just a flat plywood slab with little wood rails around the edges to keep me from falling out. I climbed up, sat on the bunk with my feet dangling over the side, scanned around to see what the other kids were doing.

Okay, the lumpy green thing squatting at the other end wasn't a pillow, it was an anorexic futon. I unrolled it. The true pillows (green again) were all piled on some shelves down at the far end of the bunkhouse, next to a stack of (green) blankets and a mountain of (surprise!) white sheets. A bunch of the jarheads, being instinctive good little worker ants, were already starting up a distribution chain.

Fine. I could use sheets and a blanket. But when Deke Luger came over with a mop in his hands and a big, dumb grin on his freckled face...

"Yo! Cyberpunk! Y'all know how to interface with one of these?"

He threw the mop to me two-handed, like it was a gun. Reflexive, I caught it.

One of Deke's buddies brought over the bucket and jumped in on the fun. "Careful y'all don't get splinters up your butt when you jack in!" He started laughing and hooting like it was the funniest joke in the entire history of the known universe. That got everybody in the bunkhouse looking our way.

Deke kicked the frame of the lower bunk. "An' you, y'lazy greaseball! Juan, or Ree-car-do, or whatever th' Hell your--"

"My name," the guy in the lower bunk said in a raw, angry voice, "is Lawrence Borec, dipshit."

Deke grinned even dumber and wider. "Is that th' Charleston Borec-Dipshits or th' Raleigh Borec-Dip—

WHAM! Borec sort of uncoiled off the bunk and went headfirst into

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Deke's midsection. Luger staggered back and tried to swing a wild punch; Borec clamped arms around Luger's waist, hooked a foot behind his leg, and threw him down. A nano later they were rolling across the wood floor, cussing and clawing, kicking dust up to hang dancing in the slanty afternoon sunlight. Somebody screamed, "Fight! Fight!"

Everybody in the bunkhouse came charging over to see.

Luger rolled face up. He got his right hand free, got in a couple short, hard punches on Borec's ribs. The jarheads cheered. "Get 'im, Deke!" "Whup his greasy ass, Deke!"

Borec was obvious better at wrestling; he ignored the punches and flipped Deke over like a rag doll. Something whacked the floor hard. "Ow!" The next time Luger's face came up he had blood running out the nose.

"Son of a bitch!" Somebody tried to kick at Borec. "Fight fair, greaser!" Borec rolled and threw Deke over again; fat red drops went arcing graceful through the air and splattered like thick red oil. "Deke!"

Two jarheads started pushing people aside to clear room to stomp on Borec.

“STOP!”

Amazing enough, everyone did. I turned around to see Payne come thundering right into the middle of the fight, grab Borec by the collar and the seat of the pants, lift him off the floor and shake him ‘til he let go of Luger.

Deke sat up, clamped a hand over his bloody nose. “Thir! Thith greather——”

“SHUT UP!”

One of Deke’s buddies tried to jump in. “Sir! Borec threw the first—”

“SHUT UP!” Payne swung Borec around and lobbed him in the general direction of the front door, then grabbed Deke by the collar and hauled him to his feet. “You two, outside!” He gave Deke a hard shove that sent him staggering.

Spinning around, Payne caught us all in a single glare. “The rest of

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you, break it up! Back to work!” He speared me with a glare. “You, with the mop! Get down here and get this blood cleaned up!” Storming out the door, he caught Luger with one hand, Borec with the other, started frogmarching them away. Luger whined something I couldn’t quite hear.

“I don’t care who started it! You fight when I give you permission to fight! Understood?”

Whine, whine.

“I can’t hear you!”

And so on. The crowd broke up, grumbling about how that crummy greaser didn’t fight fair and Deke woulda whupped him if Payne hadn’t a showed up and bullshit that greaser had Deke cold and oh yeah you wanna put money on it? and all that kinda stuff. Payne’s yelling tapered off in the distance. I jumped down from my bunk, started looking around for the bucket.

Great. Just fritzin’ great. What a peer group. Twenty junior jarheads and a bunch of violent psychotics. I couldn’t wait ‘til I found a phone.

But until then, pretend to go with the flow.

I dunked the mop in the bucket, slopped some water on the floor,

started scrubbing.

Scott wandered by, stopped, stood right where I was trying to mop.

“Wow, dude. D’ja see that? Like, what happened, anyway?”

Make that twenty jarheads, some psychotics, and one total airhead

McPunk.

I slopped more water down, splashed some on Scott’s boots.

“Move,” I said. He looked at me for a mo, the expression on his face

either total teflon cool or plain utter stupidity, I couldn’t tell (and didn’t

care) which. Then he turned, casual, and looked out the door.

“Hey, check it out, dude! Piggy’s back!”

“Piggy?”

A half dozen guys came running over. Jankowicz sort of staggered

in the door. “Piggy, my man!” Scott called out, and he gave him a big

friendly slap on the back.

Jankowicz barfed chocolate brownies all over my floor.

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Great.

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Chapter 0/B

Evening: After inspection—

(Some gray-haired old grizzle that even Payne seemed to be afraid

of came in, ran his fingers over some dusty boards, poked his nose in a

few footlockers, and made some general bitchy comments, which the

Grade Four who was following him scribbled down dutiful on a

clipboard. The old grizzle growled, “Floor looks good,” and I puffed up.

He added, “Needs wax, though,” and I remembered I was pissed at the

whole world.)

After cleaning the bunkhouse again—

(Mop the floor, wax the floor; mop again, wax again; buff it shiny,

wax the shine; buff the second coat ‘til you can skate on it. Hey Dad,

this is working out just like you planned! Cash in my college bonds; I

won’t need ‘em. Twelve weeks of this and I’ll be the best damn deck

wiper Nakamura ever hired!)

After the official orientation—

(Payne formed us up, marched us out and around the track, up to the reviewing stand, where the same gray-haired old grizzle who inspected us before was waiting with a few of his friends.

"At ease!" he said. Lawrence Borec sat down on the grass. Payne hauled him to his feet again. "Good evening, gentlemen!" the old guy said, ignoring our little sideshow. "I am Colonel Ernst Von Schlager, founder and commandant of the Von Schlager Military Academy!

"You? You are the New Spartans! Young! Strong! The leaders of tomorrow. Blessed with the good fortune to have parents who recognize the value of a sound military education!

"Just as the Spartans of old were looked down upon for blah blah blah and blah blah," he paused, smiled conspiratorial, "and yes, for their

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southern accents—"

Scott made with a yawn so big you could see his molars.

"You must be the blah blah honored history blah blah proud traditions blah my country 'tis of centuries come and go blah blah they did not stop to blah a nation never values its soldiers until blah blah heirs to a three-thousand-year-old warrior caste blah." He spoke. And drank rapidly a glass of water.)

After all of that, we got the real orientation.

Colonel Von Schlager and his homeboys marched off. Payne stepped around to the front and started reading names off a clipboard some Grade Four handed him. "Borec! Nordstrom! Jankowicz! Schmidt-Boulé! Harris!"

Bingo.

There were another ten or so names on his list, and not a jarhead in the bunch. When Payne got to the end he barked out, "Front and center!"

Taking our cue from Borec, we all sort of sauntered over slow. "Move it move it move it, lardbutts!"

He turned to the Grade Four. "Mister Jefferson, lead the rest of the

unit to the mess hall." Bright and eager, the jarheads formed up and jogged off. When they'd cleared out, Payne turned back to us.

"You boys," he said soft, "are Involuntaries. This is the last time I will use that word. But I want you to know that, while the Von Schlager Academy is an accredited military school, it is also a fully licensed psychiatric treatment facility." He detached a sheaf of papers from the clipboard, started handing them out.

"These are copies of the in loco parentis forms your parents signed. You will note that they also double as medical treatment release authorizations.

"Operating as the Von Schlager Institute, we are qualified to use aversion therapy, behavioral modification, and any and all means including electroshock to treat: chemical dependency," he handed a sheet to Jankowicz, "family violence," he handed a sheet to Borec, "clinical depression," somebody I didn't know, "juvenile delinquency."

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He handed a sheet to me.

He said more. I know he did; I saw his lips moving. But somehow I missed the rest of what he was saying, 'cause right then, for a couple black, dizzy minutes, the whole universe folded in on itself and got compressed down to two square inches of paper. Dad's signature down at the bottom of the sheet.

No question about it, I'd spent enough time trying to copy it to be absolute certain that was the real thing. Dad's signature: clear, and bold, and signed with a goddam flourish.

And right below it, mom's.

#

Supper was—aw Hell, I don't even want to guess what it was. A brief interrupt in all the shouting and running around, mostly. By the time Payne finally let us hit our bunks around dark my feet were burning, my legs were two solid cramps, and my head—

Well, let's just say I still didn't have a real firm lock on step one of my escape plan. Okay, Mikey; tomorrow. We'll bag a few Z's tonight.

There’ll be time to work on the plan tomorrow. I pulled off my boots, peeled off my socks, loosened my shirt and climbed up on my bunk. The pillow felt like a burlap bag stuffed with pine cones.

I didn’t care.

Someone somewhere threw a master power switch; all the lights went out; I didn’t care. Bats came flapping by the windows. A cricket the size of a house started chirping. I didn’t care. I felt the beginnings of a little itch on my wrists and vague remembered something about poison ivy.

I didn’t care, I just wanted to sleep.

Someone giggled, in the dark. Someone whispered a dirty joke. And then the farting contest started.

#

Piggy Jankowicz tried to run away that first night. That’s how we found out that the nearest town is Fort MacKenzie, across three hundred miles of roadless forest. Air really is the only way in or out of the Von

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Schlager Military Academy.

We also learned that the Academy has a fleet of helicopters and a top class of cadets called Grade Fives, who live in the woods, can see in the dark, and can smell a runaway half a kilometer off. A bunch of them ran Piggy down, did a Deliverance-style roughup on him, and had him back in camp by breakfast.

I decided to put off doing the escape until my plan was perfect.

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Chapter 0/C

By the time my poison ivy cleared up, I was starting to get the hang of the daily routine. Every morning around dawn two Grade Fours came storming in, braying like football coaches, and gave us five minutes to fall out of bed, get dressed, and fall in on the quad. Five exact minutes later, when most of us were out there, one of the Grade Fours would give the order to snap to, and we’d all just stand there like we had broomsticks up our buns while Payne came marching down from the

DI's quarters, crisp, precise, and dressed perfect. When he got down to us he'd slow, walk up and down the line a few times inspecting us close and personal, all the while telling each one of us in excruciating loud detail just exactly how sloppy, stupid, and unfit we were.

It was worse than being stuck in the house while Mom was on the rag. Someday I'd like to take Payne's brain apart, just to get a look at the algorithm that let him do it every morning without falling into loop mode.

Of course, someday I'd like to take Payne's brain apart, just for the fun of it.

By the time Payne had worked down to our boots, inspection was just about over. Damn, I hated those boots! I spent half an hour polishing those suckers every night before lights out. I had those damned things shining like a pair of black mirrors and they still never passed inspection!

But eventual Payne would finish criticizing our boots and admit, grudging, that he'd have to work with us the way we were--I think the whole point of inspection was to condition us to shout "Sir! Yes, sir!" every time Payne opened his mouth—and order us to face the flags and say the Pledge of Allegiance.

Real early on, I learned about this thing called LPRM: Least Painful

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Response Mode. You didn't want to do anything slow and casual, because that was good for twenty pushups. You didn't want to crack any jokes on the inspection line, because that was good for twenty more. And above all, no matter what they let you do in school back in The World, you did not want to putz around with the Pledge of Allegiance.

Our Butthole Skinheads tried that one day. They ended the pledge with heel clicks, German salutes, and a loud, "Sig heil!" Then they turned around, grinning like they'd mooned both Popes, and Payne didn't say a thing.

Before he hit them. He just stepped smart up to them, gave one a backhanded left across the face, the other a hard right in the stomach.

Knocked ‘em both flat.

The two Grade Fours closed up to flank Payne, and you could almost see his brain fighting to regain control over his reflexes. The Butthole Skinhead who’d caught it in the gut lay on the ground, moaning, but the other one sat up, rubbing his jaw, and looked mad enough to mix it good. Payne took a step closer and dropped into a fighting crouch. Then he sort of seized up with his face screwed into a dark red fury and his fists clenching and unclenching like spasmodic hearts.

The Butthole Skinhead took a good long look at him and decided to think about it some more. Payne’s brain eventually won out, and he managed to stop hyperventilating and start speaking. “You proud of yourself, boy?” he rasped soft and low.

“Nossir.”

“What was that?”

The Butthole Skinhead licked his lips and spit some blood. “Sir. No, sir,” he said louder.

“Fine. Get up.” Payne relaxed a notch, and nudged the other Butthole Skinhead with his foot. “You too. On your feet.” The guy with the cut lip helped the other one stand. Payne took a step back, and looked them both over.

Geez, you coulda powered a radio station with the tension in that

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air! Payne just stood there, looking at them. And we all stood there, looking at him, wondering what he was gonna do! A zillion pushups didn’t seem like it’s be enough to satisfy Payne; maybe he’d make them do laps for the rest of their lives. We couldn’t even start to imagine what he’d do.

Payne took a little sniff, then let out a disgusted snort. “What’s that smell?” he asked, quiet. We all went into the ‘Who farted?’ drill, but then Payne learned close to the Butthole Skinheads and sniffed again. “Why, it’s you!” said, acting surprised. “You boys make this unit stink.” He turned, and pointed to the bunkhouse. “You’d better go stand over

there," he said, gentle. "I wouldn't want one of the men stepping in you and getting his boots dirty."

They looked like they would have preferred getting punched out again. Payne's soft chew was just too humiliating; the guy with the bellyache started crying.

Payne turned to one of the Grade Fours. "Mr. Jefferson? Will you take over the men?"

The Grade Four saluted. "Sir! Yes, sir!" Then he turned to us. "Left face! Double time!" It was actual relief to follow orders and not think about what was gonna happen to those two kids. The other Grade Four took the lead, Jefferson fell in behind us, and we started off to jog a few laps around the parade field.

In a minute or two, Scott managed to drop back and get next to me. "D'ja see that, dude? They got out of drill! Just one teensy love tap, and they're excused from drill! I think I'll try that myself, tomorrow."

At mess call that evening, we found out that Payne had detailed the two Butthole Skinheads to clean a latrine pit. With garden trowels.

Nobody ever messed with the Pledge of Allegiance again.

#

Most days we followed inspection with laps, then half an hour or so of calisthenics. You didn't want to be the last one done with laps, 'cause that meant two extra. You didn't want to look lazy during calisthenics, 'cause that meant ten minutes extra. And you didn't want to do the ten

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minutes, because by the time you got done the mess hall'd be down to oatmeal and stewed prunes. That was one lesson I learned real fast.

After a breakfast two notches below the Buddy's All-Nite Burgers $1.99 Special (now I know why they call it a mess hall), we'd trot back outside for an hour or so of close-order drill, followed by a run through the obstacle course. Drill was the only time we mixed with the other serials: There were three groups that'd started in the weeks before us and one that started the week after us, but we never saw them much 'cept for the hour each morning we spent marching around the quad and yelling at

each other. Deathless stuff, like, “Lift your heads and hold them high! Two-Oh-Three is passing by!” Some of the jarheads got real into it, anyway.

Then we’d hit the obstacle course, and if everybody in the unit finished up quick enough we’d get a special treat: Free time on the firing range.

It took me three days to decide that I hated the firing range. For starters, the guns all were these stubby little single shot bolt-action Stevens .22s about accurate enough to hit the long side of a bus—if the bus wasn’t moving, and if you were real close. There were only ten guns, meaning it was always a race to see who got to them first, and they kept the guns locked up in this muzzle-ring-and-chain harness thing. So you couldn’t help but point them downrange, but this also meant you had to lie on your belly in the dirt to use them.

Then, to make things more nuisant, they gave you just ten rounds at a time, and you had to give up your gun, get back in line, and return your fired brass before you could get any more. Scott came up with the idea that they were being awful penny-ante about recycling, until the day our unit finished practice and came up two rounds short.

Damn, you’d have thought somebody’d copped the Queen Nancy jewels! Suddenly the place was swarming with Grade Fours and we had to form up and snap to for instant inspection. The detex crew came in and started working us over one by one, until Lawrence Borec stepped forward, did the admit, and handed over the two rounds. That’s when I

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realized, sudden, that all the hassle was ‘cause they were afraid we’d smuggle live ammunition off the range.

Borec was lucky. Since he’d confessed, voluntary, he only had to dig a new latrine.

Anyway, the true/true reason I got to hate the firing range was that that was where I got my first solid confirm on how the cliques were forming up. One of the junior jarheads got hung up on the obstacle course climbing wall one day, and two others helped him over, and that’s how we found out that Payne didn’t mind if we helped each other

through the course. After that, the jarheads started helping everybody, because of course the faster we got through the obstacle course, the more time they got to spend on the firing range fondling guns.

But once we got to the firing range, they were all ice and brick walls again. A couple times in the ammo line I wound up next to Deke Luger, and I'd smile, nod, give him a little half-wave, anything to try and get an acknowledge out of him. No matter what I did, though, he'd just act like I was invisible. So one morning I pushed myself right in his face and demanded to know the secret handshake.

All he said was, "There's this thing called status, y'know? You are an Involuntary."

Fine. I never did get step one of my escape plan figured out, but I did grow my own clique: Scott the McPunk, Piggy Jankowicz, and Lindsey Alistair Schmidt-Boulé, who preferred to be called Mister Style (understandable, I think). Granted, Scott was no Rayno, and Jankowicz and Mr. Style weren't exactly cyberpunk material. And taken together we weren't so proud as the Jarheads, tough as the Slammers, or devious as the Little Hitlers.

But between the four of us we had more brains than the whole rest of the camp put together, and if his highness Mister Douglas Kemuel Luger wanted to be stone cold, he could go putz himself. Far as I was concerned, they could all get together in a big circle and putz each other, sequential.

In ten weeks, four days, and seven hours I was gonna be out of there.

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#

After lunch we'd spend a few hours pretending The Academy was a school—but a school for Class D morons. No DynaBooks, no reports, no quizzes: They'd just herd us into a big room and let some Instructor drone at us for two hours. (Yeah, Instructor with a capital I. They didn't have names, just initials. The SI, the DI, the EIEIO ... Got so that if they introduced somebody new and his title ended in I, we instant hated him.)

Eventually the nI would bore himself to sleep and the Grade Fours'd

splinter us into small groups to spend another hour or two talking about it, whatever it was. Hard to talk intelligent when you don't have a chance to prep for the subject. One day we might be talking about agriculture, the next day it might be economics, the day after we might hit on some kind of -ology. But way too much of the time it was moldy old history, and we burned an awful lot of hours talking about Greeks, Persians, Hittites, Hoplites, Sodomites, Bakelites, Lavalites, Budlites— And basically, about a lot of naked guys who ran around with bronze swords trying to give each other vasectomies to the max. One day I got into a truly stupid argument with Lawrence Borec 'cause he thought it was real cool the way the Spartans fought to the last man at Thermopylae, and I thought it just proved that they were too stupid to notice that the Athenians had bugged out and left them holding the bag. Just when it looked like Borec was going to punch my lights out (typical Class D Moron response to taking the dumb side in an argument), the proctors interrupted and sent me off to a different group, where I stood around for a few minutes waiting for someone to notice me and update me on the discussing.

Nobody did. That's when the neat idea popped off the stack. I took a few more days to test it, discreet, and then took it to heart as a basic given of this weird pseudoschool: They didn't keep records.

They didn't call roll, not that there was anyplace else to be. They didn't track which discussion group you went with, or what you said. They didn't notice if you never said anything at all! Even when I had Roid Rogers for proctor, all my tensing up was wasted 'cause he acted

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like I was near invisible. One bald 13-year-old looks the same as the next, I guess, and in the Von Schlager scheme of things short-timers were hardly worth the work of harassing.

Once I flagged this, I settled in for a nice, comfty coast. When I could, I did group with Scott, Piggy, and Mr. Style, and we cranked out some great discussion. Sometimes it even had something to do with the lecture.

When I couldn't link with my clique, I just kept my mouth shut, nodded and smiled a lot, and chanted my mantra: Nine more weeks to go. Only nine more weeks.

Nine weeks, and counting.

#

We started the war games the last week in June. One hot Monday Payne came marching into discussion, announced that the games had started, and read off the names of six generals: Four jarheads (one being Deke Luger), Lawrence Borec, and my man Scott. By peculiar coincidence, these were the same six guys who did most of the talking in discussion. Sudden, I got this terrible nasty feeling that maybe the proctors did notice who said what. Maybe they noticed everything.

I cut off that line of think. They'd passed out little blue rule books to everybody, and on his way out the door Payne had casual mentioned that we had two days to memorize the rule book and prep for the first battle. That meant I'd better read the rule book thorough.

Scott was definitely no Rayno. If my clique was stuck with him for a general, we were already neck deep in the latrine.

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Chapter 0/D

Cornwallis, Rommel, Yamashita: All your really great military leaders knew how to lose with dignity. Scott Nordstrom, on the other hand, screamed out "Shit!", pounded half the little lead soldiers of the Spartan army down deep into the sand, and went stomping away from the game table cussing a blue streak.

"Piss!" He kicked the creaky wood door open, flooding the shack with bright Friday afternoon sunlight, then stormed outside and kicked something that sounded like a garbage can. "Ow! Bunch of dweebs!"

Piggy was in vegetable mode again, staring at the rafters, and Stig, the Butthole Skinhead that Payne assigned to our army (yeah, each army got either a Little Hitler, a Slammer, or a Butthole Skinhead; the generals were just thrilled about that, let me tell you)—Stig was nowhere to be found, so I caught Mr. Style's attention and pointed to the

game table. “You wanna cover the post mortem for me? I’m gonna look after Fearless Leader.” Mr. Style gave me a nod and started moving towards the proctors. I jumped down from the bleachers and followed Scott out the door.

It wasn’t hard to figure out. Even Lawrence Borec—excuse me, General Larius, of the Macedonian Mercenaries—could have flagged the reason why Scott was acting like a three-year-old. In the first battle, on Wednesday, the ace jarhead who generaled the Spartans had spent most of his time marching his soldiers around the 8- by 8-foot sand table, trying to corner Deke Luger’s Athenians. It took him about an hour to force the battle; it probably wouldn’t have taken him so long but Scott let our Theban army get in the way and the Spartans had to waste almost ten minutes exterminating us.

Scott took the loss pretty bad, ‘specially since the proctors spent the

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rest of Wednesday afternoon pointing out everything he’d done wrong and the Spartans were such an insufferable bunch of smug bastards in the bunkhouse all Wednesday night. One of the surviving vidiots made the mistake of trying to go Tommy on them; a guy wearing vidshades and earcorks is incredibly vulnerable, ‘specially to a bunch of Spartans who are really getting into the role play. Poor guy wound up dancing around out on the quad barebutt naked, while his pants took a trip up the flagpole and got the big salute.

Lucky for me Scott kept his eyes open and his pants on, so he was still in pretty good shape when I finally pried the boombox away from his ear sometime after Thursday evening mess. Once I got Angina Pectoris shut up I was able to spend a good solid hour beating some of the more elementary rules of troop movement through Scott’s thick blond head, and he even seemed to catch on to some of it.

Why’d I bother? To be true/true, the academy’s war game wasn’t half as complicated as division level Peshawar. But it was enough like Net Peshawar to flip my toggles, or at least two important ones: I hate losing. I really hate losing. And I truly totally hate losing when I get killed by someone else’s mistakes.

Result? I tried to share a little of my gaming rolethink with Scott, and I ended actually feeling a little hopeful—and Scott was feeling downright cocky—when we went into the Friday game.

The trouble is, it's so easy to confuse cocky with smart. In the battle he'd just blown, Scott hid our troops in the highlands and waited until the Spartans finished off the Athenians. Then, while the Spartans were dancing around the table trying to get position on Borec's Macedonians, Scott marched us out brave and hit the Spartans head on.

They didn't even slow down. With the Macedonians behind us cutting off our retreat, the Spartans just squeezed us like a big, juicy zit they wanted to pop. Our little band of goatherds survived about five minutes, max. The judges called the battle a total loss, Scott blew a headfuse, and like I said, he went stomping out of the gaming shed.

He was disappeared by the time I got out, but on a guess I jogged

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over to the bunkhouse. The game was bringing out Scott's latent bunkhouse sulker streak, and I figured that's where he'd be. I also figured that if there was any chance of upgrading his generaling, I'd have to jump on it before he depressed himself into turning Angina Pectoris on again.

I guessed right. Scott was lying on his bunk, knees up, holding the CD in his hands and watching the dusty sunlight prism off its surface. I jumped up on the next bunk over and waited for Scott to give me an acknowledge.

He didn't. I kept trying to be derzky, and not push myself in his face, but finally my patience timed out. "Tough break," I said, final.

He looked at me, momentary. "Huh?"

"Getting caught between two hoplite armies like that," I explained. "If it'd been another bunch of peltasts, 'stead of the Macedonians, we'd have stood a chance."

His face went into the blank mode he used when he didn't know what was going on and he was forgetting to be chill about it.

"Pelwhats?"

“Oh, sure,” I said, trying to sound casual. “The Macedonians are hoplites, didn’t you know? Heavy armor, just like the Spartans.”

“How’d you find that out?” It sounded like an accusation.

I shrugged. “It’s in the rule book. Check the hit points table, sometime. We got peltasts. Light armor. That’s why the Spartans grind us up so easy.”

Scott went back to staring at the CD. Prism reflections did a lightshow on his face. “Rules are for dweebs,” he said, mostly to himself.

“But it’s really our advantage,” I said, nonchalant. “When we want to, we can move more than twice as fast as the hoplites. Check the movement table.”

Still looking at the disk, Scott asked, “You memorized those tables?”

I nodded. “Seemed like a good idea.”

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He snapped his head around to glare at me. “You little smartass! Who appointed you my fuggin’ remedial tutor?”

“Scott, I—”

“Maybe you get it hard for rules and tables! Hell, you got a damn computer instead of a brain anyway! But I got better things to do with my mind!” He rolled over and slammed the CD into his boombox.

“Wait, dude!” I shouted. “Will you listen—”

BLAM! The opening riff of “Burn the Vagrants” came blasting out of the speakers at permanent nerve damage volume. “Get out of my face!” Scott screamed. “And take your fuggin’ little toy soldiers with you!”

“Scott, I’m just—”

“Bug off, you little twerp! If you’re so fuggin’ smart, why didn’t they make you general?”

Good question, that. Jeez, at least Rayno listened to my ideas! I bit my lip and walked slow out of the bunkhouse. There was a little tool shed about twenty yards away that basically offered the only bit of shade

on the quad, and I was still sitting on the doorstoop of the shed, trying to think up sharp ways to let Scott know he was being a pinhead, when Mr. Style came walking up with a bunch of Macedonians.

"Christ Almighty!" one of the Macedonians—a southern-fried jarhead but otherwise an okay guy—said, pointing at our bunkhouse. "That bimbo sounds like a tomcat what got his balls caught in a blender!" The other Macedonians laughed a lot and kept walking; Mr. Style stopped and sat down next to me.

"I see Scott is taking the loss with his usual good grace," he said, jerking a thumb towards the noise. "You making any progress on him?"

I shook my head. "Certified zero. How'd the rest of the battle go?"

"Typical. The Spartans waxed everybody else's fannies."

I picked up a couple pebbles out of the dirt, and started pitching them at nothing in particular. "Lindsey, old buddy--"

"Please don't call me that again."

"Sorry." I tried again. "Mister, this is gonna be one long summer, if

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all we're gonna do is get beat up three times a week by the Spartans. Think the proctors will let us Thebans stage a palace revolution?"

He smiled. "They just might. Here, I picked up a little present for you." He reached around, pulled something out of his back pocket, and threw it in my lap.

I picked it up and looked at it. "New rulebook?" I asked.

He got to his feet, and started brushing the dust off his fatigues. "It's about twice as thick as the last one. And this time, we only got one copy. I was supposed to give it to Scott, but I thought I'd put it where it'd do some good."

"Thanks, man." I flipped to the back of the book and started looking at the tables. If what I was hoping for was there ...

"Next battle's Monday," Mr. Style said. I didn't answer 'cause I was getting absorbed in the rules. There was some truly good stuff in the new book. Fatigue factors, logistical tables, unequal forces. "Try to find something in there that'll keep us from looking quite so stupid, okay?" I

think I nodded; I don't remember for sure. Jeez, there were factors in that new rulebook that were going to make the game a lot more interesting! It was almost as cool as Net Peshawar!

I didn't notice Mr. Style walking off. In fact, I didn't notice much of anything until about the fourth time through "Brucie B Dead," which was when I noticed I was getting real tired of listening to Angina Pectoris. Getting to my feet, still reading the new rulebook, I wandered off on the path behind the bunkhouses.

It must have been fate. I'd never really gone that way before, I was just looking for someplace quiet. There was a little sort of ravine that opened up back of the shower building, ran parallel to the line of buildings. Down, past the wood shop; past the dispensary. I was walking along, paying zero attention to everything but the rulebook, until the mo I hooked my toe on a root and near went splat on my face. Then I caught my balance, looked up, and spotted a sign I never noticed before: Library.

Hmm. There was a lower floor under the quartermaster's, and it was

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a library? You wouldn't suppose that meant...? Deep in my most hidden, inside pocket, my Starfire started to itch and chafe.

I patted the pocket. "Easy, fella," I whispered. Then I pasted my most honest, trustworthy smile on my face, stepped up to the door, and tried the lock.

It was open. Trying my best to radiate sincerity and politeness, I opened the door and went in.

The library was one big room, but still a cramped, musty place. There were three big wood tables and a bunch of maximum-discomfort style style wooden chairs in the middle, and loads of big bookshelves up to the ceiling around the perimeter all stuffed full of fat, dusty old analog books. At the far end of the room there was a cluttered metal desk, and near it some tall old guy—the librarian, I figured—was standing with his back to me, poking at a bookshelf. But nothing in the room looked even slightly like a decent LibSys term. Geez, there wasn't even an Intuit CD reader, and every damn nursery school back home has

one of those!

My eyes went back to the librarian. There was something odd about him, too, and it took me a few seconds to flag it. He was big old guy, beefy going to fat, with wire-rim glasses and thinning white hair. A few liver spots on his scalp showed through—the hair! That was what was odd about him! What little hair he had was actual normal length! And he wore civvies!

"What's the topic for your paper?" he asked weary, not turning around. His voice was deep and rumbly.

"Huh?"

"It seems like that's the only time you cadets come in here," he said, as he turned to face me. "When you need to do instant research for—"

He stopped short, and pulled his glasses down to look over the tops of the rims. "Why, you're one of the summer boys!" He broke into a big smile. "What brings you in here?"

This was an embarasser; the poor old guy seemed actual pleased to see me. "Uh, sir, I was just looking for a real quiet place to read, sir."

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"A quiet place to read!" He came swooping around the tables and offered me a giant finger-crushing handshake. "Well, you've come to the right place! I'm Ralph Lewellyn, the Academy Librarian."

"Librarian, sir?" I asked. "Not L.I.?"

It took him a few seconds to catch it, then he laughed. "No, son, I'm most definitely a librarian." He walked me over to a table and offered me a chair. I sat down. "Now, is there anything in particular you want to look at? Or would you just like to browse?"

"Actual, sir—"

"Not sir," he corrected me. "Ralph. Or Mr. Lewellyn, if you feel the need to be formal."

I smiled, and tried again. "Actual, Ra—Mr. Lewellyn, I got my hardcopy right here." I pulled out the rulebook, and his face fell.

"Oh." Then his face went bright again. "Still, feel free to browse, if you want to. I've gotten some of my best ideas by accident, by

stumbling across them while looking for something else."

"Thank you, sir." I opened the rulebook and started pretending to read. Lewellyn hung around for a mo, then wandered back to where I'd found him. When I figured I'd been reading long enough to convince Mr. Lewellyn, I started doing a furtive scan of the room. No net jacks anywhere I could see; no nodes, no term plugs, not even a crummy dataphone port.

I guess I wasn't doing too good at furtive. "Is there something you need?" Lewellyn asked, from across the room.

What the hell, what did I have to lose? "Actual, sir—"

"Actually," he corrected me. "Don't you ever use adverbs?" He shook his head. "I'm sorry. You were saying?"

I looked around the library again, then blurted it out. "I was wondering if you had a LibSys terminal."

Lewellyn laughed at some inside joke, then took off his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose. "A LibSys! Son, I'm lucky to have electric lights!" He laughed some more, then put his glasses back on. "Actual, son, I do have a computer. It's in the back room; would you like

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a look at it?"

Would I? Is the American Pope female?

I shrugged, and tried my best chill noncommit. "Oh, I guess so. If it's not too much of a pain." Like, for sure. Understatement of the year.

Lewellyn smiled, and gave me a little gesture to follow. "C'mon."

He led me over to a back room, unlocked the door, and turned on the single bare-bulb overhead light. "There she is."

The thing on the table had a keyboard at one end, which is how I inferenced it was a computer. But there were wires all over the place, and big weird boxes scattered around the table, and circuit boards with chips the size of cockroaches just sitting naked to the world. For that matter there was an old dumb-TV sitting in the middle of the whole works. It looked like Georgie's junk parts bin, without the bin.

I walked around the table, trying my best to be reverent. "Wow," I

said. “You build this thing yourself?”

Lewellyn smiled, proud, and laid his big hand on the chassis. “This, my boy, is an Apple II-Plus. You’re looking at a genuine piece of American history, here. Why, back before the Nipponese Technology Embargo...” I started to zone him out. Like, maximum yawn! Next he’d be telling me about how the U.S. used to put up satellites without Soviet boosters!

While he was nattering, I looked at the computer again and tried to believe somebody’d actually paid real money for it. “Is this like, a kit or something?” I interrupted Lewellyn. “Or are you fixing it? I mean, Christ, it’s a mess!”

Lewellyn looked hurt. “It’s in good working condition,” he said, defensive. “I just added a few extra cards to it, that’s all. Now it overheats if I don’t take the top off.” He pulled the chair out. “Here, try it out.”

I looked at him, dubious, but he looked so eager I just couldn’t turn him down. “Okay.” Gingerish, I sat down and put my fingers on the keyboard. “Now what?”

“Turn it on.”

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I looked around, and spotted a big white square labeled POWER in the lower left corner of the keyboard. Gentle, I put a finger it. Nothing happened. Okay, it wasn’t a touch switch.

I pushed it a little harder. Nothing continued to happen. “Think your power switch is broke,” I told Lewellyn.

“Gotcha!” he laughed. “That’s the pilot light! Everyone makes that mistake the first time!” He quieted down to a chuckle, and then pointed to a power strip on the floor. “Use that. The original power switch broke years ago.”

With my foot, I tapped the switch on the power strip, and all of a sudden Frankenstein came to life! Lights flashed, the TV set flared on, and something started grinding like a spoon in a garbage disposal. Good Lord, I was working with a steam-powered PC!

Slow, the screen came up and glared at me in text so ultra-crude text

I could see each pixel: APPLE][

After about a minute, I said, “Now what?”

“Press reset,” he said, as if it was total obvious. I looked around,

found a key marked RESET, and pushed it. Something I took to be a

login prompt appeared.

“Okay, I got it now,” I said. I entered my usual CityNet login.

Frankenstein answered, ?SYNTAX ERROR.

Okay, it didn’t like my user ID. I did a getuid.

?ILLEGAL DIRECT ERROR, it said.

Maybe it was my group ID. I tried getgid.

?ILLEGAL DIRECT ERROR, it repeated.

Something screwy was going on. I tried to grep the ID file; the

screen went nutzoid in low-res graphics, erased itself, and said

?SYNTAX ERROR.

This was getting serious. I went straight to adb, the operating system

debugger.

?SYNTAX ERROR, it said. But now it was showing only the

bottom four lines on the screen!

Lewellyn looked over my shoulder. “Having trouble, son?”

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I leaned back in the chair, ran my fingers through my stubbly hair,

and said, “You sure this thing is working?” He tilted his head back and

looked at the screen through the bottoms of his glasses.

Quiet, he said, “Son? What in God’s name is an ADB?”

A real ugly feel started to creep up my back. “What operating

system does the Apple II use, sir?”

He was still squinting at the screen through the bottoms of his

glasses. “You didn’t load the operating system. You’re still in BASIC.”

BASIC? Oh fritzing great, the lang with training wheels!

“I think,” Lewellyn said soft, “we’d better start over.” He turned to a

shelf, and pulled out a flip-top box full of big plastic squares. “These are

floppy diskettes,” he told me. “You boot the operating system off

diskette.”

I sighed relief. For a moment there, I'd been afraid that the damn

antique stored data on clay tablets.

#

That afternoon, Lewellyn taught me all about floppy diskettes,

booting up, and PR# commands. When he wasn't looking I slipped the

Starfire out of my pocket and plugged it into the power strip; I couldn't

find anything to jack it into, but at least I got its batteries back up to full

charge.

I shot a couple hours building a rep with Lewellyn and pretending to

be impressed by his primitive cyberskills. Just before I left for evening

mess call, he took me into his deepest confidence and showed me a

diskette labelled "Space War," then told me I was free to use his gear

any time.

Hey, just what I wanted: Unlimited access! Sure, Lewellyn was a

putz, and his equipment archaic to put it mild, but I had a place to hide

out and at least one older who knew which end of the keyboard to sit at!

The more I thought about it, the better I felt. Eight weeks to go, a

quiet place to hang out, a chance to get to know the Starfire. I figured I

could tolerate 8 more weeks—

And then, Operation Revenge. For a mo, I wondered if Dad realized

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what they were teaching me at the Academy. I was learning lots of really

useful things. He was going to be in serious trouble when I got back.

By the end of mess, I was smiling so big and feeling so good I didn't

even remember what I'd had for dinner. In fact, I didn't even mind it

when I got back to the bunkhouse and Scott put Angina Pectoris on his

boombox for the 5 X 1014th time!

Along about the 1015th time, though, I did start to get a little cranky.

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Chapter 0E

Starting in July, we got a big time thunderstorm every third morning

around 3 a.m., like clockwork. If I thought it was possible I'd swear the

Academy arranged the storms, just to make our lives miserable. One week Payne pulled us out of lecture and sent us out to detassel a cornfield: Four days of hot, dirty, work, and soon's we got the damned job done a big storm came through and stomped half the field flat. The next week another serial was putting together a prefab bunkhouse: The night after they got the last roof truss up a truly wicked storm came along and took the roof right off again.

By the middle of month the trees were lush and green, the raspberry bushes were tough as barb-wire, and the obstacle course had turned into a monster truck mud bog. Payne just kept right on pushing us, all the while shouting stuff about jungle warfare, but even he had to admit it was ridiculous the morning we got down to the firing range and found the guns under a foot of water. In the first evidence I ever saw of him being even slightly human, he sent some divers down to unlock the rifles, and thereafter we could fire standing up if we wanted to. (I noticed my scores got definite worse, though.)

The pseudoschool went about the same as always. Lecture, battle, analysis; lecture, battle, analysis. Lawrence Borec got totally into the roleplay and somehow learned to save all his hostility for the game; I found out in lecture one day he really was Macedonian. ("Not Yugoslavian, dipshit," he said. "Not Bulgarian, not Greek, and above all, not Serbian." Me being a Harris, from wherever it is that people named Harris are from, I don't understand this fossil nationalism business at all.)

That explained the Macedonians. We Thebans, on the other hand,

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turned into the Poland of the Peloponnesian Wars and got real expert at losing. Sometimes we lost dramatic, like the time we danced around until we had perfect position on the Athenians, only to have the proctors rule us too tired to keep fighting (that's how Scott learned about the fatigue factor). Other times we just got stomped into a wet, greasy smear by the Spartans as they were on their way to fight somebody important.

One Monday Borec's Macedonians formed an alliance with Deke

Luger's Athenians and blew the Spartans right off the table, and that's how we learned that alliances were okay. The next day Scott cut a deal with Borec, and in return for all our desserts for the rest of the week, the Macedonians joined us in a half-hearted way on Wednesday and stabbed us in the back and linked with the Athenians again on Friday.

"Alliances," the proctor pointed out afterwards, "are based on mutual advantage, and have nothing to do with whether you like your ally."

I was starting to get real tired of listening to Mister Diplomacy's boombox.

The rules kept evolving, too. Supplies became a tangible on the board; one Monday the Spartans and Athenians formed an alliance, Sparta supplying the muscle and the Athens supplying tons of grain, and they looked damn near unstoppable—until the Thracians (another footnote like us Thebans) sent a small unit in the back door and burned their granaries. It was just exact like the time that bozo opened an Iranian front in Peshawar and cut my fuel lines. The Spartans wheeled and marched on the nearest enemy granary, but two moves into the assault they ground to a stop and the proctors called time.

"This is the lesson of Alexander's march across the Gedrosian Desert!" the T.I. of the day said, backlinking us to the last lecture. "The belligerant force left the bulk of their supplies at their initial base, and did not adequately defend them.

"This is a recipe for disaster! A supply line has a definite tensile strength; stretched too far it's very easy to snap." The T.I. turned to Lawrence Borec. "General Larius: How could the Spartans have obviated this situation?"

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I flagged they never asked Scott questions anymore. I guess they were getting tired of hearing him say, "Huh? Well, I dunno dude, y'know?"

I sure was. I don't know how I ever thought he was even half as derzky as Rayno.

#

By mid-July, everything we did was focused on the game. They replaced the rulebook with a three-ring binder, and we started getting a set of insert pages every day. Domestic politics entered the game the week the Athenians took the field with Deke Luger barred from the room: Seems they were getting tired of his bonafide Bonaparte swagger back in the bunkhouse (They were tired of it? They should have asked us!) and his citizens took a vote of ostracism, sent him into exile for a week.

The Thracians had their fifteen minutes of glory the next Wednesday, when the Spartans whacked everybody but Thrace, then were recalled from the field four moves away from total victory. The Thracians were declared the winners by forfeit, and the Spartan general was furious. "What d'y'all mean, helot revolt?" You could always tell when the southern-fried jarheads were mad; they forgot to hide their accents.

"Sparta is an object lesson in the clumsiness of the police state," the T.I. explained, patient. We had a different T.I. that day; a tall, blond guy named Schmidt, who always talked quiet and calm. "Most of the actual work was done by helot slaves. Only true citizens could join the army. What this means to you is, the more effectives you put in the field, the fewer true citizens you have back home to keep the helots suppressed."

The Spartan general swore softly.

"There is another way," Schmidt said, a wicked twinkle in his eye. "The Spartans originated right-wing death squads. You can kill all suspected helot revolutionaries."

The Spartan general's face brightened.

"Of course," Schmidt added, "pursuing that policy makes it a virtual

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certainty that the helots will revolt. And it cuts down on the number of slaves you have—," he shrugged, and smiled, "—so you have to pull effectives from the field to do actual productive work. Sort of like the deep South after the First American Civil War."

The Spartan general refused to rise to the bait. With a grumble, he turned to his adjutant. "Billy Ray, how many effectives can I really

use?" The adjutant started flipping through the rule book, looking for that data. He wouldn't find it; I knew that rule book backwards and there was nothing like that in it.

Billy Ray found a table and ran his finger down the page. "Ten percent, tops," he said. "Five percent'd be better."

Now wait a minute! I flipped my rule book open and started whipping through the pages. Dammit, I knew that data wasn't in there!

Then it dawned on me. It wasn't in the Theban rule book. Separate rules for separate armies. Just like geopolitical level Peshawar. Oh boy.

The Spartan general was doing some calculating, his lips moving silent, his fingers wiggling. "Five percent? Good God, that's—"

"Five hundred in a good year," Schmidt said. He turned to the rest of us. "By the way, starting next Monday losses are cumulative. Each week is a generation. So you will need to protect your breeding population, or you will be out of the game, understood?"

Scott was staring at a wasp that was flying up near the ceiling, tapping its way along the rafters; he snapped his head down to nod affirmative, then looked at me with What did he say? in his eyes.

Speaking of breeding populations, I could think of one real good candidate for a retroactive vasectomy.

Schmidt was talking to the Spartan general. "This is especially a problem for you," he said soft. "Under Spartan law, male citizens cannot marry until they're 30. Even then, man and wife live apart. Your reproduction rate is very low."

I kicked back in my chair, and blew off some relief. Cruel to their kids, hooked on a death-before-dishonor attitude even worse than Bushido, governed by the gerusia—a bunch of stodgy old farts who

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made the Politburo look damn near open-minded— and now this! The more I learned about the real Sparta, the happier I was to be Theban.

#

By the end of July, Sundays had turned into my definite refuge day. We'd start the day off with a toned-down inspection, go through just a

little drill and a mild harangue, then form up on the quad for generic church services. All the rain had turned the quad into a simulated rice paddy, and after awhile the academy chaplain—being allowed to be almost fully human— realized we were standing ankle-deep in mud and started keeping church blessed short.

The Butthole Skinheads, though, being chronic jerks, couldn't resist the opportunity to screw off. The last Sunday in July they finagled themselves into the back row, carefully set their hats on the ground, and snuck off. An hour later, when church was over and they were missed, they jumped sudden— excuse me, suddenly jumped—out of one of the nearby outhouses and started telling some stupid story about sinking into the mud and having to climb back up through the latrine.

Payne gave them about thirty seconds. Then he smiled, paternal, and suggested that there might be more cadets down there, so they'd better go back and shovel it out to make sure.

The rest of us went off to breakfast. By this time the Butthole Skinheads were getting pretty familiar with shovelling out latrines, so they were done quick. Half an hour later, Stig came into the mess hall, kicked the bigger lumps off his boots and stood his shovel in a corner, then got his tray and sat down with the rest of us Thebans.

I think me and Mister Style set a new speed record for finishing breakfast that morning.

#

Sunday afternoons were the high point of my week: Liberty time. Four whole hours of doing nothing. I could go back to the bunkhouse and get my civvies on; I could wander anywhere in or around the academy I wanted. For four hours, I wasn't a Theban anymore, and I wasn't an Involuntary, and I wasn't anything but Mikey Harris, kid,

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normal, unit of (1). Even Payne stopped shouting at me, provided I stayed out of his way and didn't do anything real stupid.

I suppose I could have tried to go runaway. The vidiot who'd gotten depantsed tried that, in early July. The Spartans had been giving him a

real hard time; dumping buckets of water on him while he was gone Tommy, that sort of thing. So one Sunday he tried to stow away on the mail plane.

Idiot. The plane wasn't scheduled to leave until Monday. He turned up missing at evening mess, of course, and the Grade Fives were out half the night looking for him. When they found him, about0/ 30/0/ , they took him back to their camp.

Piggy Jankowicz'd gotten off easy. Hearing the vidiot's stories about the Grade Five camp and watching him do punishment for a week was enough to convince me.

But not everybody. One of the Spartans was having a real hard time—there were all kinds of weird status things going on among the jarheads that I, being an Involuntary, never got updated on—and the last weekend in July, he took off on a carefully planned runaway. Squirreled some food; found a map; even stole a compass, someone said.

This one the Grade Fives didn't bring back. Instead, a couple days later the rumor started going around that someone'd seen them bringing in pieces of bloody uniform and a fresh killed bear. A well-fed looking bear.

After that, I stopped thinking about running out. Instead, I hard coded my Sunday afternoons for one task; keeping my Real World identity current in my mind. The jarheads usually went down to the firing range and shot themselves deaf, the vidiots went Tommy and vedged out, the comikaze just stared at his vidslate (the batteries had crapped out sometime in late June), the Slammers and Butthole Skinheads—aw, who cares what they did?, and Scott and the rest of the Thebans went back to the bunkhouse.

Me, I was getting real tired of listening to Angie Pectoris, so I went to the library and hung out with Mr. Lewellyn. Three weeks to go. Just

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three more weeks to tough it out.

#

Lewellyn's Apple II turned out to be a semi-fun machine, in a truly

limited kind of a way. I mean, working with it must have given Lewellyn the same kind of feel some olders get from restoring old private cars. I admit I got some pride (and more than a little surprise) from just being able to make the damn thing work. But every time I went to the library I'd end up asking myself, Is this feeling truly worth having to spend four hours listening to Lewellyn correct my grammar?

I decided it was. If nothing else, the library was the only place in the Academy where I could hide out and explore my Starfire. It processed rings around the Apple! Every Sunday I cooked up something new, tucked it away in bubble, and burned its params in my living memory. When I got back to The World and CityNet I was going to be downright dangerous!

For contrasters, when Lewellyn was watching I twiddled around with the Apple, and that was kind of like teaching a pet brick to do tricks. Lewellyn used a file handling program, FID (FIle Developer), a lot. The only fun thing I came up with was cracking into FID and tinkering around with it until the name had new meaning: File Intercept & Destroy. Along about the first of September--after I was long gone--it'd start eating his files. But do it in such a random-like way it'd take him weeks to figure out it was the program, not him.

Aside from sucker-trapping the Apple, what else was there? Only Space War, the lamest game in creation. Ultra-crude graphics, no sound to speak of, no hit points or charisma or anything interesting. It was just pure logistics. Sometimes Lewellyn and I played each other one-on-one or two-on-two; most of the time he was busy, so I split up control of the four nations/empires/whatever with that little dim computer and wished it had enough smarts to learn from watching me.

Each player built ships, launched attacks, and tried to take over other star systems. All sides had the same level of technology, so the whole game really came down to one question: Who controlled the most

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production capacity? If you could destroy the other empires' manufacturing centers and protect your own, you won. No exceptions.

Geez, even the Academy's war game was better than that!

After a while I figured out that there were a couple hardcodes in the game, made it real predictable. No luck factors, no randomization, no technological leaps. Surprise counted a little, but not much; coordination counted more. Massing a fleet and then attacking always worked better than launching small units and trusting everyone to arrive at the objective at the same time. It always took at least three-to-one numerical superiority to overwhelm an entrenched defender, and two-front wars were always disastrous. Most importantly, I had to manually keep track of what I'd deployed, because otherwise the little idiots'd just follow orders and I'd wind up watching reinforcements get slaughtered following up lost causes.

Once I'd finally flagged the last of the hardcodes, the game got boring to the max. So one day I started tearing the program apart and improving the code, just for the hell of it. I added valor; I added random space monsters that could eat ships in transit. By the end of July I'd reworked Space War into true fun, and the only untouched spot in the whole thing was a little glop of hex up in the initialization section which I assumed was the original programmer's ID.

One Sunday I decided to decode that, too, and redo it. I mean after all, the program was mostly mine now, right? I tore into the hex, converted it to ASCII, looked it over.

The original programmer was Ralph Lewellyn. And he'd written it less that five years before.

"I was trying to impress the Colonel," old Lewellyn said, when I inquisitioned him about it. He had a weird, faraway look in his soft blue eyes. "It was just after I was hired, son. The summer boys were doing galley warfare that year, and I couldn't believe the primitive way they were conducting the games. So I decided to write a simulation using the same rules." Lewellyn looked at me, sad. "War never changes, you know. The tools of the trade change, but the basic business never does."

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I looked back at the star map on the video tube, and realized with a start that a lot of the hardcodes closely matched the params of the

Peloponnesian War we were fighting on the sand table—and for that matter, the basic rules of Peshawar. Sudden, it all clicked together. Space War, Peshawar, and the ancient Greeks: it was all the same game.

"Well, son," Lewellyn was rattling on, "Just about the time I finished the program, I discovered that Colonel Von Schlager absolutely hates computers. Believes that they make it too easy to be detached and emotionless; too easy to make command decisions that throw lives away. That's why you game on a sand table, in a closed room. The Colonel's theory is that you have to smell each other's sweat, and feed on each other's excitement. You must—have you gotten to platoon-level actions yet?" I shook my head. "Oh," Lewellyn said. He took off his glasses, rubbed the bridge of his nose, and then started cleaning his glasses on his shirt tail. "I don't know much about the Colonel's past," he said at last, "but something terrible must have happened. When you get to platoon-level actions, you'll discover his Number Three rule: Always look men in the face before you order them to their deaths."

Dim, slow, I started to remember something. About how I always played a tank platoon in net Peshawar; about how I really hated those anonymous net generals who sent me out to get killed. Hated them even more than the enemy.

Lewellyn sighed heavy, and shook his head. "I often wonder what tremendous guilt it is, that makes the Colonel the tortured thing he is today."

I was still processing what Lewellyn had said about platoon-level actions. "The Number Three rule? What's Number One?"

Lewellyn looked up at me, snorted a little laugh, and said, "The Number One rule around here, son, is Keep Your Head Down. I carry that one close to my heart! The Colonel took one look at Space War, said, 'Don't ever show that to me again,' and I didn't. As a result, I still have my job!" He smiled, and made a hands-up gesture with his crooked old fingers that took in the room and everything. "You have to admit

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that this isn't a bad way for a retired widower to live, don't you?

Beautiful country, all the bland food I can eat, and all the books I can read. My kids wanted to put me in a nursing home."

His eyes suddenly focused on something only he could see, and the look on his face turned so bad I thought he was sick, at first. Then I realized there were tears coming up in the corners of his eyes. "You have no idea what it was like before," he said, soft. "Ninety million aging Anglo voters, all voting for people who promised us Guaranteed Medical for the rest of our lives, all demanding the absolute best for ourselves. We turned the world upside down: welfare recipients became walking organ banks. Immigration for sale, if you were willing to donate a kidney. The second class citizen ghettos, the Evolution At Work policies." He sobbed, shuddered.

"It took my wife five years to die," he said, not really to me. "The home kept her body alive years after what should have been a fatal stroke, trying new procedures, attempting useless surgery. So they could keep collecting her MediMaint payments, you see? It wasn't a hospital; it was a warehouse for dying bodies." His voice dropped to a whisper. "When I go, I want it to be here. Where the medical vultures can't get one last insurance billing out of me."

Lewellyn shook his head, snapped back into focus, and looked at me. "I suppose this must be pretty morbid for you, son. If you don't mind, I think I'll just... " He got up, and started for the door.

Then he thought of something, and turned around. "Say, you remember how I said that I always find my best ideas by accident, while looking for a different book?" I nodded. He turned to a shelf, and picked up a fat old dustcatcher. "I was looking for a book on Shiloh," he said, "when I found this for you. I think you'll find it useful." Tossing the book to me, he turned and toddled out the door.

I looked at it a while, running my fingers over the cracked old leather. This sucker was old! Silverfish bait, for sure; the pages were practically flaking apart. No name on the binding, and no cover art. I could almost feel boredom seeping in through my fingers.

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But what the hell, the old guy meant well. I opened the cover and looked at the title page. A History of the Peloponnesian War, adapted from Thucydides by Reverend somebody-or-other. Feeling a little excitement, I flipped to the index. Yup, it was all there: Names, dates, tactics.

I turned back to the tube, and looked at Space War. I couldn't quite ID the feeling, but at last I decided there was something wrong about taking Lewellyn's name out of the program. Sure, he was a putz. The original code was mediocre, at best. But he meant well. He was really trying to help. Sure, there probably weren't ten more computers in the whole world this thing'd run on, but it didn't seem fair to erase him completely.

I settled for changing the ID and adding one line. Now it said, "Original program design by Ralph Lewellyn. Mods by Mikey Harris."

That'd make him happy, I figured; seeing his program mature into something good.

While I was making a backup of the new code for Mr. Lewellyn, my FID bomb fired. A month early. Trashed both the source and target copies; a month of work on Space War shot to hell. All that was left was Lewellyn's original.

Guess I wasn't as sharp on Apple II timing as I thought.

I spent the rest of the afternoon hunting down and destroying all the suspect copies of FID. I was late for evening mess, and by the time I got to the chow hall they were down to cold mashed potatoes, lima beans, and breaded veal cutlets in congealed gravy. But I sat down, determined, and ate it anyway.

Sometimes things are just your own damned fault.

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Chapter 0/F

By the first week of August, I had a choice: I could either zipper my spatterzag jumpsuit shut, or I could breathe. While back home skinny and pale was in, I had to admit that tanned muscle didn't look that bad on me. (Of course, my impersonation of tanned muscular arms still looked like toastix compared to the jarheads.) I could jog five klicks

without breathing hard; I could put ten out of ten bullets in the 40mm circle at 50 meters (prone position) and seven of ten from standing. I could talk to Lewellyn for hours without him correcting my grammar.

The one thing I couldn't do was win a battle for the Thebans.

By August, the game was getting truly complex. The soldiers —me, Mr. Style, Stig, and Jankowicz—had direct control of troops at the tactical level, and the generals just sat up at the top of the pyramid, generalling, all their orders piped down to the troops through the adjutant. (In the case of the Thebans, me.) Alliances had shifted, and reshifted, and finally settled down into two basic sides—Sparta versus Athens—with everybody but us and the Thracians committed to one side or the other. Scott kept telling people we were free agents like it was a big joke, but most of the time we wound up siding with Sparta, just because I didn't like Deke Luger's superior attitude.

Hey, is there a better reason?

There'd been some shakeups in the armies. Luger had turned into the ultimate stiff-necked twonk, so the Athenians kept sending him into exile. But because he was the only good general they had, they had to keep calling him back, and that just made him more smug than ever. The Spartan general had stepped down, voluntary, 'cause the Spartans had started losing on a regular basis; seems he just couldn't stop secondguessing his field commanders.

Scott went the opposite way. The further he got from command, the

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happier he acted. Literally moving further and further up into the bleachers, he started seeing himself as a visionary, like Hitler, or Quadaffi. My suspicion was he'd found something hallucinatory growing out in the woods. More and more, I was the strategos, doing the actual work of leading and generalling my Thebans, while Scott was the archon, dreaming up concepts (most of which I had to ignore) and taking credit for my victories.

Yeah, just like net Peshawar. Y'know, in Periclean Athens the archons were subject to regular votes of confidence, and they could even

execute incompetent politicians. Tempting thought...

Nah. I could put up with Scott. Two more weeks; just two more

weeks.

Then the quiet arrangement turned into a true/true fact after one

battle I blew in a real stupid way.

As had become normative, the tactical situation was already set up

when we filed into the room. We Thebans took a few moments to look

over the sand table, walk to our section, sit down. Stig waited until

nobody was looking at us, then leaned over and whispered one word in

my ear.

“Aegospotami,” he said.

“Gesundheit,” I answered.

“No, dammit!” he hissed back. “Listen to me: I recognize this setup.

The proctors were talking about it while I was shovelling out that latrine

last Sunday. It’s the battle of Aegospotami—only setup for land, not

galleys!”

“Get real,” I whispered back.

“No, look at it. The Athenians are bottled up in that valley. I know

how you can waste them in ten moves, tops!”

“Sure,” I said. “This another joke, Stig?”

He looked away and shook his head like I was being the most stupid

putz in all creation, then turned back to me. “Shit, Harris, I know you

don’t trust me. And maybe I think you’re a limp pud, too, with your

fuggin’ cyberpunk attitude. You always act like you’re so goddam

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superior just because your old man bought you a lot of pricey toys!

“But just once, could you maybe try listening to me?”

I gave him a cold look that told him just exactly how much I trusted

him—’bout as far as I could throw him—and said, “Right.” He bit his lip

and turned away. A minute later the proctors called start, and battle was

joined.

As usual, we wound up siding with the Spartans. The battle was a

true toughie, with a lot of damage on both sides. Mr. Style’s platoon got

wiped; Jankowicz's nearly so. It looked like the Spartans were going to lead us into a win, but a lot of loose ends were still hanging when the proctors called time.

Instructor Schmidt stood, and turned to the armies. "Today's analysis is for generals only. The rest of you are dismissed." Stig jumped up and went storming out of the room with the other Butthole Skinhead. Mr. Style and Jankowicz followed with everybody else; I was still collecting my notes and closing up the rulebook when Payne came out of the dark and grabbed my arm.

"Harris, you stay," he said. Turning to Scott, he said, "Take a hike, Nordstrom." Scott smiled, broad, like he was really getting away with something, and strolled out of the room. Payne led me over to the join the rest of the generals, and sat me down. When the last of the cadets had cleared out, the proctors shut the door and turned up the lights, and Schmidt stepped out of the room, nodding deferential to Payne.

It was Payne's show.

Payne clasped his hands behind his back, took a deep breath, and started pacing back and forth slow, all the while giving us the hairy eyeball. Sudden, I flicked back eleven weeks to the plane, and stared hard at his bulging muscles, his crawly tattoos. I hated him then. I hated him even more, now. Maybe, just maybe, I felt a little respect...

Nah.

Payne let out one more heavy sigh, and stopped pacing.

"Gentlemen," he said stern, "your performance today was disgraceful."

He paused, but no one spoke up. Even King Deke had learned the Keep

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Your Head Down rule.

"I'm not talking about the battle," Payne went on. "You fought that as well as you could." This was puzzler; we all started shooting each other sideways glances, trying to figure out what he was talking about.

"It comes down to one word," Payne said soft. "It should be a familiar one.

"AEGOSPOTAMI!" he thundered.

When we'd all climbed back down from the rafters, he continued.

"The lesson of Aegospotami is a simple one: Never ignore good advice, no matter who it comes from." He clasped his hands behind his back, looked at the floor, and then looked up at us again, bulldog angry.

"Here at the Academy, we also use Aegospotami to illustrate a much more important lesson: Unity. That's the core strength of every command. If you do not have unity, nothing else matters!" He calmed down; his face faded back to its normal color.

"Eight weeks ago, each of you was given one sleazeball. One disreputable character you never would have picked yourself; one deadend kid exactly like the type you'll find in every platoon, factory, and business office in the world!" Payne paced a bit more, and stared at the rafters.

"There's a thing we call the Pygmalion Effect. If you take a gutter kid, remove the worst of his influences, and treat him as if he's an honest, responsible person—if you invite him to join your unity—ninety-five percent of the time he will!" He turned back to us. "During the past week, each of your problem soldiers was given the opportunity to 'overhear' a discussion of the battle of Aegospotami. No doubt at least some of them recognized it on the situation table today, and tried to alert you.

"But not one of you acted as if you had listened to them!" Once again, he took a deep breath, and lowered his voice. "Ninety percent of what we do here at the Academy is directed towards one goal, and one goal only: To build unity. Any moron can teach you to shoot a rifle, or ford a stream. History, politics, economics? You can learn them

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anywhere.

"The difference between boys—even the most extraordinarly talented boys—and men, is unity: The ability to surrender personal gratification in favor of the common goal! If in your time here we have not taught you to understand that, then we have failed." Payne turned abruptly, and strode towards the door. "You have one battle left to fight," he said without breaking stride, "and I assure you, you will need

all of your platoon commanders.” Throwing open the door, he marched outside.

After a few blinks, I pulled together my notes and followed him out the door. Damn Payne! Double damn him! That’s when he was worst of all!

When he was right. I set off on a jog, looking to find Stig. I had some apologizing to do.

#

Friday, Zero Week. My last week at the Academy; in defiance of probability also the week I turned 14. We stood in the gaming room: tense, keyed. I don’t know whose idea it was to pipe in the music, but the pulsing drums and squealing flutes worked. I’d never felt so wired up, so on, so loaded with singing nerves before!

Stig stood at my right hand, Mr. Style on my left; Jankowicz and Scott were on the flanks, and the whole Spartan alliance was ranged up the bleachers behind us. Across the table, the Athenians and their allies sat with contemptuous, cocky smiles on their faces. They looked like a pyramid of smug, coming to an apex in Douglas K. Luger’s confident freckled face. His eyes locked mine for a mo, and he smiled at me with easy contempt. I let my gaze drift back down to the table.

Like two flesh ribbons snaking over the hills and into the valley, the two opposing battle lines stood facing each other. No reserves, no flankers; this time we were going to do a head-on all-out slam dance. And my little Theban peltasts were the front line.

I didn’t turn around. Turning around would have wrecked the illusion that the Spartans liked us any more than the Athenians did. The

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Spartans had a joke they told, when they thought we weren’t listening; a quote from some old Chinese clown named Sun Tzu. “You don’t use your best iron for horseshoes, and you don’t use your best men for infantry.” The Spartan general had put us in the front line because he was hoping we’d grind a little of the shine off the Macedonian’s armor while we were dying.

His mistake. He'd ignored the Colonel's Number Three Rule:

Always look men in the face before you order them to their deaths. If

he'd looked us Thebans in the face, he might have noticed our secret

smiles.

Someone turned up the volume; the drumming got mentalbreakdown

intense. It was turning into a hot, noisy place, that game

shed. A few weeks before the back line commanders had taken to

whispering insults at each other, and the proctors had let it go. Now it

was a low-key roar; the hot blood shouting obscenities over my head.

The air was thick, and close. I could smell the sweat, feel the fear. And I

could feel that adrenalin burn.

"Advance," my general said softly. Slowly, cautiously, I moved my

line forward. The Macedonians advanced a little, then braced for a

charge. In a few seconds we'd closed to four movement units. Four

moves for the heavy Macedonian hoplites, but one crazy dash for my

peltasts.

Time to find out if Thucydides was right. I tapped Stig on the

shoulder. "Go."

Stig and I had spent two hard days working out the maneuver, and

he executed it simply perfect. Jankowicz and Mr. Style dropped back,

while Stig and I wheeled and formed three-abreast columns. Scott forgot

his part, but that was okay, we didn't really need him. Borec's

Macedonians wasted a move trying to guess what we were doing and

compensate for it in a bass-ackwards way, and by then it was too late.

Stig's column was charging.

The maneuver's called a phalanx. A human battering ram. The first

six or dozen soldiers in the column die for sure, but a line just cannot

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hold up against the pinpoint pressure. My Thebans were using it a few

centuries early, but the proctors didn't stop us so it must have been okay.

One move later Stig's soldiers had knifed right through the

Macedonians and were running loose behind their line, wreaking bloody

havoc. I sent my column charging into the hole, catching the second-line

Thracians between the swords of my soldiers and the spears of the Athenians behind them. I punched through both lines in one move, and then the real trouble started.

I know I talk the Spartans down a lot, but I'll say this for them: They're not totally stupid. When my general saw Jankowicz and Mr. Style rolling out their phalanxes, he started shouting out quick orders. The Spartans broke formation and followed the Theban lead, and within five moves the Athenians didn't have a battle line anymore. They had a bunch of cut off little units that were getting hacked to pieces.

Damn, we had a celebration that night! One of the proctors dropped off a bunch of CDs for Scott's boombox (not one Angina Pectoris disk in the lot, thank God!), and Payne brought in a couple cases of Coke and a whole lot of junk food. Piggy Jankowicz won the belching contest hands down, with a drawn-out window-rattling gutbomb that had me looking for a mop. And after Payne left, Roid Rogers showed up with some fresh batteries for the comikaze's vidslate and a real-time ROM I'd never seen before: The Girls of Ft. Wayne (Geez, major boner material!) We hooted and hollered and screamed 'til midnight, and everybody told truly outrageous lies about their experience with that subject, and I lied with the best of 'em. At long last, I was finally as good as a regular southern-fried hero, and even Deke Luger treated me like I might actually be a real human being!

The glow was still on the next morning, when Payne announced that there was no more drill, because we'd reached the end of the summer session. All we had to do was clean the bunkhouse one last time, and then it was liberty time for the rest of the day and packing for the flight out tomorrow. Twenty hours to go! What a fuggin' high note to leave

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the Academy on!

I stole fifteen minutes out of cleaning to run over to the library, return Thucydides, and thank Mr. Lewellyn for everything. Then I ran back to the bunkhouse and started packing. The mail came around noon.

All summer long, I'd only gotten two letters, both lines on cards from Mom. This time, the letter was from my Dad. It said:

#

"Dear Mikey,

"I'm sure by now that you've come to appreciate the values of a Spartan education. I'm also sure that this is a time of mixed feelings for you, knowing that this is your last week at the Academy.

"Well, son, I've got some good news for you. Business is good. So good, in fact, that my bonuses are up. Therefore your mother and I have decided to enroll you full-time in the Von Schlager Military Academy.

"Make me proud, son.

Sincerely,

D. W. Harris

#

The world turned hot, red, angry. I crumpled the letter into a tiny, tiny ball, but no matter how hard I crushed it, I couldn't make it disappear. God and Heaven and Christ on crutches; I'd gotten the life sentence. Oh why, oh why, oh why...

I dropped the letter, I think. I was still standing there, staring blind furious at the wall of the bunkhouse, when Scott came bouncing in.

"Twenty hours!" he crowed. "Twenty hours, dude, and we are out of here! Ain't that fuggin' terrific?" Not looking at me, he pulled off his boots, flopped on a bunk, and stuffed Angina Pectoris into his boombox.

KA-BLAM! The opening riff of "Burn the Vagrants" came blasting out at a volume that made my fillings rattle.

About three notes into the song, I snapped. Jumping over Scott, I grabbed the boombox and sprinted out the door. "What the hell?" Scott shouted, but he was barefoot and soft and couldn't keep up with me.

Fifty yards down the line, who should I meet coming around a

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corner but Roid Rogers. "Harris!" he shouted, a wicked smile on his face. "I just got the good news! Come Monday you're my meat, little boy!"

I was too mad to be afraid. I'd learned a lot that summer, about

things like surprise. And pugil sticks. Ducking my head like I was afraid of Rogers, I shifted my grip on the boombox and kept running.

He never saw it coming. Rogers was still reaching out to catch me and just starting to open his mouth again when I did a sidestep, threw the boombox around hard, nailed him square in the solar plexus.

"Ooof!" He collapsed like a brain-shot pig.

I didn't even slow down. What were those words Payne used? Sleazeball? Dead-end kid? Pygmalion effect? If they thought the Butthole Skinheads were a problem, God help 'em. I was gonna make Stig Ballock look like a fuggin' amateur!

The yelling was just starting up a good ways behind me when I got down to the firing range. The boombox was still belting out Angina Pectoris at 110db; putting it down on a stump, I grabbed a big rock, smashed open the weapons locker, and stuffed a handful of bullets into my pocket.

Bang! The first bullet took out the left tweeter. Bam! The second drilled the right. Pow! Pow! Pow! I stitched a line of bullets through the FM dial. The usual Angie Pectoris caterwauling made great dying screams!

Blam! The CD drive flew apart in a flash of red laser light and little chromy pieces. God, it made me feel good! I felt heavy footsteps thumping down the path behind me. "Drop that rifle!" Payne shouted. I ignored him, and reloaded.

Little Mikey Harris's war on the world had just turned hot.

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Chapter 10/

Fall: The scrubby brown oaks down in the swamp were past their prime and not much to look at, but the aspens up on the east ridge were a beautiful gold color that just glowed in the light of the setting sun. Long shadows crawled out of the forest behind me, stippling the buildings on the other side of the quad in the subtle interface of light and shadow.

It's amazing what you notice when you take an hour or two to just stand in one place and watch the big old world roll by.

A red-tailed hawk soared along the crest of the ridge, riding the dying thermals in lazy circles. Pinion feathers flared and played the wind like a brilliant musician's fingers; tail feathers twitched and adjusted and kept the trim just absolute perfect. A flying bird, when you think about it, is an incredible complex piece of machinery; all balance, and trim, and micro fine-tuning. For years I'd always thought birds just sort of flapped their wings and went, but no. It's more like they swim butterfly stroke through the air.

Dinosaurs didn't die out, is what Biology Instructor Baker told us. Rather, they evolved into birds. Imagine that: dinosaurs swimming through air.

The hawk spotted something. It twisted its head around sharp. Wings flared; then a tuck and a roll and it dropped like a diving Stuka. A moment later it was climbing again, some kind of dead rodent in its talons. Beautiful.

#

Uh oh. A couple upperclassmen walked into my peripheral vision. I screwed my back muscles just a titch tighter, stuck my chin out just a hair further, and locked my vision on the great ambiguous beyond. As they walked by, I snapped off a quick, robot-perfect salute.

They stopped, looked me over. Surreptitious, I checked out their

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braids: Grade Twos. Damn. Just upperclass enough to be utter jerks.

One stepped up, smiled, and gently asked, "Do you have a name, plebe?"

"Sir! I am a worthless, insignificant maggot, sir!"

He nodded, sage. "I thought as much." He started to turn away, then turned back. "Say, weren't you out here last week, too? You must be a slow learner, plebe."

"Sir! I don't have the sense God gave a garden slug, sir!"

He nodded again. "Very well. Carry on." He started to turn away.

"Yes, sir! Fuck you very much, sir!"

He hesitated a mo, shook his head just a bit. Gotcha, you S.O.B.!

Amazing how if you soften the “F” and run the “k’you” together, no one is really sure what you said. They think they know what they heard, but they can’t quite believe they heard it, and by the time they loop through it a few times and decide it bugs them, they’ve got enough doubt so that they feel damned silly making an issue of it—

The Grade Two decided to let it go. Him and his buddy, they strolled off.

Me, I went back to watching the sky.

#

Fat old Jupiter was rising, a bright whitish blob making his slow, ancient way through Taurus. Some nights it was so clear out there I could swear I saw the Galilean moons. One night I shook up Physics Instructor Schmidt real good by picking out Mizar and Alcor with my naked eyes.

I turned my head just a bit, trying to get a look at the Big Dipper.

Cadet boots came pounding across the quad behind me. Damn. Eyes front, Harris! Ten-shun, Harris! The kid came into view, and I relaxed a half notch. It was just another Grade One, like me: Billy Pickett, from Georgia.

“Yo, Cyberpunk!”

Scratch that. He’s not quite like me; he’s got a name. Me, I’m maggot, to Roid Rogers. Plebe, to any other upperclassman. But more

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and more, to the guys in my bunkhouse, I’m stuck with the title of Cyberpunk. Dear God, how I truly hate that name!

“Y’all listenin’ to me, Cyberpunk?”

“Yes, sir.” I’ve learned to call everyone sir. Saves time.

“Cadet Captain Rogers says y’all can come in now.”

“Thank you, sir.” I didn’t move. This threw him for a mo.

“Well?” Pickett thought it through. “Uh, at ease.” Nope, try again.

“How ‘bout, dismissed?” There, that’s the magic word. Turning stiff, I started marching across the quad, towards my bunkhouse. The gang back home should see me now; I’m so good at robodancing I can hardly stand

it.

Pickett fell in beside me. “Tell me something, Cyberpunk. Do y’all go out of yo’ way to piss off Captain Rogers?”

“Sometimes we do,” I said.

#

“It’s called objectification,” Lewellyn said. “It’s a fairly common technique for building group unity. One of the weird constants of human behavior is that every group seems to have one natural goat: one member who’s slower, or dumber, or clumsier, or in some way different from the rest. So you tighten up the group by encouraging everyone else to pick on the goat.” He paused, to run a liver-spotted hand through his thin white hair and adjust his bifocals.

“But I’m not slower, or dumber, or...”

Lewellyn waved a hand to cut me off. “No, Mikey, you’re different. Jesus God, son, you’re one of the smartest ones that’s ever come through here! You can shut off your cyberpunk speech markers whenever you want to; I’ve heard you do it. You can switch on your attitude problem whenever you want to; I’ve heard about you doing it. You could sleepwalk through your classes and still get straight A’s, if you wanted to.

“But no, for some reason you want to work at being a problem case. Why, Mikey?”

I shrugged. “Because I hate being here?”

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“So what. You are here. You’ve got to bloom where you’re planted, Mikey. You’ve got to be where you are—my God, I sound like a Rod McKuen greeting card.” He took off his bifocals, rubbed the bridge of his nose, and put them back on again.

“Look, we were talking about objectification, right? The problem is that most people—even fourteen year old boys—feel empathy for the goat. They don’t enjoy seeing another person humiliated. So if you’re going to use that technique to build unity, you’ve got to short-circuit empathy somehow.

“And that’s where the nickname comes in. Give your goat a

demeaning name—strip him of his identity as a human being and turn him into an object—and pretty soon everyone forgets about that pesky empathy business." Lewellyn shook his head, and smiled in a sad kind of way.

"Funny thing is," he said, more to himself than me, "it doesn't really seem to matter what the name is. Piggy, Lardbutt, Jew Boy; I've seen them all work. Kraut, jap, commie, gook, honky, sand nigger..."

"Cyberpunk," I added.

"Yeah, well—" Lewellyn shook it off. "So where were we, before we got off on this tangent?" He adjusted his glasses again, picked up the spiral-bound manual. A clump of pages fell out. "Ah, here we are. The 2K memory range from location $C80/0/ to $CFFF is reserved for driving subroutines or a 2K PROM on the peripheral..."

He stopped, looked at the guts of his Apple][strewn all over the table. Poked a knobby finger at a dead peripheral card. "Right." He frowned, looked at the book again. Gently closing it, he put it down, came up with a big, sunny, fraudulent smile. "Say, Mikey, what do think about the idea of starting over with a completely different approach?"

I took my fingers off the Apple's keyboard, drummed a roll of frustration on the edge of the case, thumbed the power light a few times.

"I'd say it was bogus," I decided.

"Now, Mikey—"

"Look, Mr. Lewellyn, I'm real glad you want to take the time to

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teach me about computers. I just don't understand what 6502 registers have to do with anything."

He sighed a little; exasperation, I'd guess. "Self- discipline," he said at last. "Yes, of course this thing is an archaic piece of junk." He reached over, laid a hand on the frame of the Apple. "Yes, there haven't been any new computers built around this processor since the turn of the century." He took a deep breath, blew it out, considered his words. "But Mikey, you've been living in the stratosphere! You're up there messing around with code objects, and icons, and fifth-generation

structured query languages. You're an expert at manipulating symbols.

"Here; this is programming down to the bare metal. Up 'til now you've been a technological shaman, calling up your wind and rain demons without the slightest idea of what they really do. When I'm done with you, you'll know how to make weather. Believe me, Mikey, some day you'll thank me for this."

Why do olders always say that just before they dump on you?

I looked at Lewellyn. I looked at the Apple. I looked at that thick stack of gibberish manuals.

What the Hell. It sounded like more fun than going back to the bunkhouse and polishing Roid Rogers' boots again, anyway. "Okay. So what's this new approach you were thinking about?"

Mr. Lewellyn stroked the white stubble on his chin. "First, let's do an EXAMINE. What's in the P register?"

I keyed in the command. "Uh, $B0/ ."

"And that is?"

C'mon, Mikey, think! You should know this one! "Uh, branch on carry clear."

"And the addressing mode?"

"Is absolute."

#

"Mail call, Cyberpunk!" I stood the mop in a corner and accepted the envelope. The handwritten address was big and sloppy, with smiley faces in the cursive loops. My name was spelled "Mickile Haris."

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I tore open the envelope and read:

#

"Dear Mikey;

"Things have been real quite around here since you went away to summer computer camp colege and everything. At first I was worried about you then I ran into your mom in the skyway and she told me how you wer acsepted for a special colege for brillant kids and you wer doing reel good and happy with all your new friends and you wer your just too

buzy to right. I'm so jealus, how'd you get to be so smart, ha ha!

"School is such a bore and everything. I keapt getting F's from Lewis but he pased me anyway just to get me out of his class I think. Georgie has turned into like a total straight nerd turd and he wont talk to me any more or anything, most times if we meet in the hall he pretends like he doesnt even see me. I dont know what his problem is but if cant be nice then I just say fuck him. Without you and Georgie though the cyberpunk stuff just isnt any fun so we dont do it much any more. Ive been listening to alot more music lately, my favrite band is The Smegs. Do you get to listen to music much at your colege?

"Well, study halls about over so Ive got to sing off now! Have a super fantastic time at colege and dont burn your brains out studying and dont party too much with those sororitty babes, ha ha! C U next summer!

"XOXOXO

"Lisa

"P.S. Rayno says hi."

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Chapter 11

During the regular academic year, the Von Schlager Military Academy was a different place, totally. Sure, the basic environ was the same: the uniforms, the marching around the quad, the saluting and discipline and all that stuff. But there were times you might even mistake it for something like a normal high school. Geometry class, for example. Three hours a week of plain old class instruction with Instructor Minelli, who didn't bark or scream or bounce kids off the wall or any of that stuff. No proctors; no discussion about guns or troops or bronze swords; just three hours a week of putzing around with compass and dividers and getting all full of chalk dust. Sure, it would have been easier with a computer and some good CAD software, but geometry is geometry, and if a line outside a plane is parallel to a line of the plane, the line is parallel to the plane. (In Euclidean space, anyway. I brought up Einsteinian space and got two hours of KP for being a smartass.)

The Von Schlager regular year curriculum was heavy on the math, science, history. Okay, so there were some muff courses; no Multicultural Empowerment Studies or anything like that, but I did get stuck with Freshman Comp. Even then, though, the slant was different: "I don't care about creativity," was Instructor Coleman's favorite rant. "I don't care if you never find your unique, self-expressive voice. You are here to learn to communicate effectively, Harris! Some day men's lives may depend on your ability to say what you mean and have it understood!" He sighed, heavy, and rubbed his forehead. "Now, let's take another look at this paper.

"No, I'm not going to say anything about the way you make nouns of verbs and vice versa. I'm not up to that headache. But will you kindly learn to use adverbs? Look here: "I turned slow." Read my lips, Harris: I

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turned slowly. He ran quickly. Now, how would you rewrite this sentence?"

I squinted, scratched my chin, came up with a tentative. "The rope lay tangledly on the ground?"

"ARGH!" Coleman slapped himself hardly on the forehead. "Like water off a duck's back! I don't know why I bother. I just do not know why I bother!"

I didn't know why he bothered that muchly, either.

#

Some of the classes I got into, in spite of myself. Instructor Schmidt's Astronomy course, for starters. Some nights he'd take a bunch of us out for open sky fieldwork, and tramping through the woods and across the fields under a starry winter sky is just about the most beautiful thing in creation. The crisp snow crust breaking away under your feet; in places little drifts of powder snow so dry with cold they squeak when you walk on them. The air that burns your lungs and yet tastes so sweet and pure; the water vapor in your breath freezing into a rime of frost around the hood of your parka. On full moon nights the woods were so flooded with light you could practically read, which is real cool and goes a long way towards making you feel comfortable in

the dark, but on clear, moonless nights—

The stars! My God, it's full of stars! Sirius, hanging there like a incredible bright blue sapphire. Ursa Major, turning stately around Polaris like a great big combination clock and compass. The Milky Way, all splashed across the sky, more real and vivid than you ever would've believed possible. And Gemini, with friendly Castor and Pollux, and Procyon right below, so close and so sunlike we might actually go there some day.

It took me a full month to realize the Fuji-DynaRand platform was just one tiny pip, fading into the treetops and scatter just above the horizon. Insignificant. Hardly worth the work of noticing.

I liked that.

Some nights there were aurorae, slow dancing in purple and green

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ribbons around the sky. Once History Instructor Feinstein came out with us, and he was interesting for a change. While we watched the aurora twist and caper he talked soft about what it was like to be a kid during the Star War, with all the lasers scattering ghost light off the upper atmospheric dust, and the kinetic killers popping and flashing and raining streaking debris like meteorites, and the charged particle beams spiralling down the Earth's magnetosphere to trigger auroral displays that still glowed livid in his memory.

Another night Biology Instructor Baker came along, to give us a little object lesson in the limits of eyes. We humans are so dependent on daylight, and color. Go out on a still winter night, sometime, and stand there with your eyes closed. Amazing how much life is going on—and how much of it you walk right by, when you depend on your eyes.

My favorite part of Astronomy, though, was Orion: Some nights when I felt rotten, I could just step outside and look at the big guy in the sky, I got a charge. It's a male thing, I think; you look at Orion hanging up there, tall and proud in the winter sky, and you stand up a bit straighter, square your shoulders a bit broader. Almost gets to be religious.

I mean, not like Chaplain Thomas droning at us during Sunday morning assembly, or the guys in the Wotan Club with all their drumpounding. The big guy in the sky touches something deep, something that makes you resonate. Gets real easy to see where all those Father Sky and Mother Earth religions come from: Orion. He's up there, and you know he's been up there for three thousand years, not watching, not beckoning. Just saying, Be proud, boy. You can be like me.

A freezeframe from my memory: Me, alone, in the middle of a frozen field, under a crystal bright winter sky. If you don't think about God then, you're dead.

#

Of course there was a down side, and the down side had a name, and lo, its name was Roid Rogers. Seventeen hours a week, I belonged in the classroom. Five hours a week, I could hide out with Mr. Lewellyn.

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Another five hours, I was in the gym or out on the parade field with Payne.

The rest of the time, I belonged to Cadet Captain Rogers.

I spit-polished Rogers' boots. I made his bunk. I washed and pressed his uniforms, and the damn creases had to be absolute perfect or he'd throw his clothes on the floor and make me start over. As Lewellyn would say, he did a real good job objectifying me, and by December he'd successfully zeroed out all the coolness points I'd acquired in the Peloponnesian Wars and turned me into the Grade One class's designated dump. Some weeks I wound up polishing every damn boot in the whole damn bunkhouse.

Of course, on the days Rogers was feeling mean, it gave him a special thrill to make me stand at attention for an hour or two out on the quad, all the while saluting every upperclassman who happened by and telling them what a jerk I was.

At night, when I was finally allowed to drop exhausted on my bunk, I'd have the most incredible livid technicolor dreams about Rogers, and the day I'd finally catch him alone down at the firing range ...

I wouldn’t kill him; at least, not right away. No, I’d start by shooting him in the throat. He’d turn around, a look of horrified surprise on his face, and try to cry out, but all he’d be able to do is cough blood. Then, before he could move another step, my second bullet’d take out his left kneecap, and he’d fall down on his one good knee.

He’d raise his hands to beg, look at me real pitiful, and try to sort of plead for his life, but all the while he’d be choking on his own blood and gasping for air. I’d watch him cold and calm, reload slow, and wait for him to turn his head to see if anyone was coming to help him. When he did, I’d put my third bullet right through both his eyes.

Oh, it’d be beautiful, blood spraying everywhere, him flopping around like a beached carp! He’d fall over backwards and lie there, trying to scream, while I walked over, rested my rifle muzzle lightly on his nuts, and gave him a slow count of five to realize exactly what was coming next. Then I’d turn him into a boy soprano the hard way.

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And then, not being a totally cruel guy, I’d give him two in the heart at point-blank range. Beautiful.

Okay, I admit this isn’t everyone’s idea of a sweet dream, but you try living with a guy who makes you get up half an hour before reveille just to pre-warm his boots. My passive resistance phase lasted almost until Spring.

Until the day I came down with some kind of low-grade upper respiratory virus, and I was up all night wheezing and drinking lots of water to try to keep the sore throat damped down. And it was a real cold night, so I didn’t want to go out to the latrine for the discharge cycle, so I just sort of crossed my legs and tried to ignore my aching bladder and sat there, drinking more water, until around0/ 40/0/ when I finally kind of dozed off into a fitful sleep. Only to have Rogers wake me an hour later and order me to warm his boots...

Some temptations are just too strong to resist. I did KP for a month and spent another year in utter Hell, but dammit, it was worth it!

#

I learned a lot of things, that year. I learned to talk southern-fried when I wanted to blend into the woodwork, and to switch on the total cyberpunk lang when I wanted to make with the pain-in-the-ass routine. I learned that when the mess hall served up okra and grits it was a treat, not punishment like I thought at first. I learned to tie a full Windsor knot for my dress uniform, and I learned that A-200 Pyrinate comes in gallon jugs for institutional use and smells like hell, but it really does kill lice real good.

The biggest surpriser was learning that during the academic year, Payne was actually something a lot like a normal Phys Ed instructor. The one you had to watch out for was The Colonel.

Forget fried chicken. Colonel Ernst Von Schlager, Real Army Retired (whose Army?, I kept wanting to ask), School Commandant, and Our Beloved Founder, was a true study in fossil Prussian arrogance. A tough, grizzled, remote old S.O.B. with gray-bristle hair and steely blue eyes, we lower grades didn't mix with him much. Most times he was just

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the capstone on the Sunday assembly: after church services, the gruntherders would march us out to the quad and make us stand at attention while The Colonel went into some loud tirade about whatever had pissed him off lately.

If the Colonel showed up for your class, though, you were in for a real treat.

That's sarcasm, if you didn't recognize it.

Example:

The Colonel struts across the gym, hands clasped behind his back, scowl on his face. He stops, pivots. "Consider the various liberation wars!" he bellows. "If you can see 50 yards in a jungle, it's not a jungle, it's a clearing!

"Consider the First through Fourth Jihads! The defenders had visibility out to two klicks, but the towelheads used human wave tactics. You simply can't reload fast enough to stop a human wave!" He starts pacing again, cycling up for the next outburst.

"The unpleasant truth, men, is that excluding air power and crewserved

weapons, the majority of battlefield killing takes place at ranges of under 100 yards. Combat is a close and personal thing. And what modern automatic rifles are best at is disarming their users' really fast!"

He pauses; his voice drops to a softer note.

"Now, in a few years some genius will probably figure out that the thing to do is to slow down the rate of fire and make the bullets smarter. They've already done that with combat aircraft. Who cares if a Batshit missile costs a million a pop, if it's virtually guaranteed that you can take out a thirty-million dollar aircraft with two shots?

"But in the meantime, remember that when you fire an M-29 on full auto, you disarm yourself in less than 3 seconds. Then it becomes very close and personal. The ugly truth, men, is that when it comes down to it, your best friend is your bayonet. That's why it helps to think of a rifle as a pikestaff that happens to shoot bullets.

"And that is why you work with pugil sticks!" He steps over to the back wall, picks up that blunt-ended staff, hefts it for balance and spins

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it around like a cheerleader's baton. "Now, who's first?" He looks us over, sharp and squinty, locks eyes on me. "You! Front and center!"

Getting your brainpan bashed in by an old grizzle is in some respects very educational, but it still hurts.

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Chapter 12

Spring: The sun was shining, the birds were singing, Payne was braying. "Fall in! Form up!" We stopped kicking the soccer balls around the airfield, dashed over, and tumbled into some kind of order.

"Dress that line!" he bellowed. "You call that a line, pissants?"

While we were shuffling and fidgeting, a Grade Four carrying a big gun stepped out of the briefing shed. Payne made eye contact with the Grade Four. The Grade Four shot him a little nod.

"Ten-shun!" We snapped to so perfect we clicked.

"Thank you, sargeant," the Grade Four said quietly. Payne stepped

back deferential, and the Grade Four walked up smiling. “Hi,” he said to us, and smiled again. I relaxed a notch. My God, at last, a Grade Four who was halfways human.

“Hello, lads,” he said, a bit louder. “I’m Cadet Captain Johnson, and I’m here today to give you a little introductory lesson in large-bore rifles.” He looked at the gun in his hands, then held it up over his head. “This,” he shouted out, in a parade-field bellow he’d obvious learned from Payne, “is a Russian Mosin-Nagant battle rifle! Designed in 1890 by Colonel Sergei Mosin and the brothers Emile and Leon Nagant, it was the premier Soviet infantry weapon through most of the twentieth century!” He dropped the rifle to port arms, slapped open the action. “A bolt-action box-magazine repeater comparable to the American ‘03 Springfield or the German ‘98 Mauser, it is, like most Russian small arms, a technically crude, yet extremely rugged and effective weapon!” He closed the action, flipped the rifle over, popped open the trapdoor on the bottom of the magazine.

“Chambered for the seven-point-six-two by fifty-four millimeter

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rimmed cartridge—that’s the same bullet as an AK-47 round, but in a case that’s fifteen millimeters longer—it was perhaps the first of the modern high-powered military rifles!” Johnson unzipped his belt pouch and whipped out one truly enormous rifle cartridge. The jarheads all oo’ed and ah’ed.

Johnson dropped the round into the magazine. “Rifles and carbines based on the Mosin-Nagant design were manufactured by the Imperial Russian Arsenals at Tula and Sestroretsk,” he dropped another round into the magazine, “the French Manufactory at Chatellerault,” he dropped in a third round, “the Swiss Industrie Gesellschaft at Neuhausen-am-Rheinfalls,” he dropped in a fourth round, “the Austrian Osterreichische Waffenfrabrik at Steyr,” he slapped the magazine trapdoor shut, “and by the American firms of Remington and New England Westinghouse.” Flipping the rifle over, he hefted it, as if considering something. “As late as 1960, variants were still being

manufactured by Finn SAKO and the ChiComm People's Armory."

Johnson cranked the bolt open again. I saw a shiny brass cartridge pop up into the action. "Beginning with the Russo-Japanese War of 1904 and the Russo-Persian War of 1911, the Mosin-Nagant rifle saw action in most of the major conflicts of the Twentieth Century! From the frozen plains of Russia to the steaming jungles of Southeast Asia, it has been proven time and again to be a reliable, accurate, and deadly weapon! For these reasons, you will continue to find Mosin-Nagants in service in the Third World to this day!" He slapped the action shut. The cartridge seated with an ominous thunk.

Raising the rifle to his shoulder and pointing it down the airstrip, Johnson squinted through the sights. Then he returned it to port arms.

"The Mosin-Nagant has two design flaws," he said. "The first—a relatively limited magazine capacity—did not prove relevant until the Vietnam War, and the advent of the American M-14 and M-16 automatic rifles.

"The second is more serious. Unlike comparable German and American designs, the Mosin-Nagant has no cross-bolt safety!" Johnson

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held the rifle out at arm's length and pointed to a large knobby thing on the end of the bolt. "While the exposed firing pin does mean that the weapon remains combat-serviceable as long as the barrel and bolt are intact—if all else fails, you can always fire it by hitting it with a stick—

"It also means that any sudden jar or impact," Johnson's voice choked off. The rifle slipped out of his fingers; he fumbled, bobbled, almost caught it. The butt of the rifle hit the ground—

"BLAM!"

By the time the sound stopped echoing back from the woods, I figured I was safe getting my face out of the dirt. Payne's boots were right there, two feet off my nose.

"Very good, Harris," he said. "You too, Spinelli. Howe. Chang." He stepped back, looked around, took a deep breath and warmed up for some bellowing. "The rest of you: What the hell's wrong with you?

Didn’t you hear gunfire?

“Let’s do this again. Drop!” The rest of the class flopped down hard on the grass.

“Better. Now give me twenty.”

#

My Tuesday afternoon History class let out early. I ducked around the Admin Building to avoid running into Rogers and started down the back path through the woods to the library. Mr. Lewellyn had given me a doozy of a problem that Monday, and I didn’t feel like waiting ‘til my scheduled Wednesday study time to see if my answer checked out.

Plowing through the ferns in the gulley, I darted up the slope and bounced into the Library.

“Mister Lewellyn!” The door was open; the lights were out. The library was dark, empty. Odd. “Mister Lewellyn?” Cautious —I didn’t want anyone to think I was sneaking someplace I didn’t belong—I slipped through the stacks. The door to Lewellyn’s office was ajar. I pushed on it, a little; old hinges turned with a slow groan.

He was lying, sprawled on the floor, next to a tipped-over stepstool and a scatter of books. His face was the color of cold, dead, ashes.

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One instinct told me to get out of there before anyone saw me; another said to get in there and do something. I listened to the second one. His skin was cold and clammy; his heart was beating slow, s-l-o-w, but it was still beating. His breathing was shallow, almost imperceptible.

I ran for help.

He never regained consciousness. They MedEvacced him to Calgary; I never heard what happened to him after that. A week later the new librarian—a tall, beak-nosed sourball named Fellows—showed up, and Lewellyn’s Apple got crated up and sent to the storeroom.

“So you’re that Harris kid,” is how the new librarian introduced himself when I showed up. “I’ve heard about you.” Then he informed me that the library was a privilege reserved for responsible cadets, and that I would need a signed note from an instructor before I would be allowed to study in the library.

The day I realized Lewellyn was never coming back was the last time I ever cried.

#

I wrapped up my first Grade One year with a lot of nice round numbers: zeroes in everything. Absolute complete flunkout. The plan didn't work, though. Dad just slapped down another tuition check and the Academy reenrolled me.

My surprise was total. All my life, I'd been taking competitive exams to get into better schools. It'd never occurred to me there might be such thing as a school you couldn't flunk out of. One night I woke up at 3 a.m. from a nightmare about being forty years old and still a Grade One cadet, and that's when I decided I'd better make minimum effort at passing some classes.

The summer I turned 15 was the worst summer of my life. I couldn't mix with my class; after all, they all were Grade Twos, and I wasn't even a Grade One. I couldn't mix with the summer boys; after all, I'd been through that game already. Payne's summer boys did galley warfare that year, and I spent most of my time in the mess hall, cleaning up after their foodfights.

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Until the first week of August, when it occurred to me one day they were just about ready for the final trick. I insinuated my way next to a couple of them, tried to tell them about the battle of Aegespotami. But who listens to a cyberpunk?

#

My second Grade One year was even worse than the first one, and for one major reason: Douglas Kemuel Luger. He'd gone home at the end of that first summer, and I'd bid good riddance to him then. Trouble was, I flunked out at the Academy, but good ol' Deke Boy flunked out of the real world. On the first day of the fall semester I fell in for inspection and found Deke standing next to me, smug and cold as ever, and it only took me a little contact to flag he'd picked up something new while he was back home: a mean streak a mile wide.

I decided, since I couldn't get anybody to like me, I was going to flip my toggles.

Sunday night, after I finished polishing Roid Roger's boots, I went to bed as Mikey Harris. Monday morning I woke up as Max Asshole, Def Cyberpunk.

During the winter of my Grade Two year, I took basic electricity and learned about Ohm's Law: resistance plus energy equals heat.

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Chapter 13

One minute I was sleeping; next minute I was waking up all fury and derangement with a hand clamped over my mouth and an evil whisper in my ear. Then I recognized the Survival Instructor's voice. "Get your boots. Go outside. Maintain silence."

Hey, at age sixteen Harris, Michael A., former CyberPunk—me, to tag a constant—might be contending for Oldest Grade Two in camp, but this kid's no vidiot! Soon's I IDed that swine I knew precisely what kinda loaf had pinched on me and opted for Least Painful Response Mode: Instant Compliance.

After three rotten years at the Von Schlager Military Academy, I was finally starting to get the hang of LPRM.

This time it meant barefooting out of the barracks and into the cool and dewey late-May dawn—the pines were still; the owls had called it a night and the meadowlarks weren't ramped up yet —sitting down in the butt-freezing damp grass, and velcroing my boots while the S.I. dragged four more blear-eye Grade Twos from their bunks. In a coupla minutes I was sharing the grass with skinny Murphy, in t-shirt, sweat pants, and sullen attitude; hulking Buchovsky, in waffle weave, cut-offs, and cowlike calmness; snake-dangerous Kao Vang, in heavy black pajamas and Who-me-did-I-get-tipped-off? smile—

And gruppenfuhrer Luger, in boxer shorts. Oh fritzing great, just the guy I wanted. Luger, at near 17 the reigning Oldest Grade Two in camp and my self-appointed mortal enemy. Luger, telepathing, "If I wasn't too tough to shiver I'd kill for that thinsulate jumpsuit, Harris." Luger:

Murphy and Kao Vang grouped with him and hostilated at me. I could see already this was gonna be certified zero fun.

One by one we got our boots on and sneaked behind the trees to get

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the moss steamy. Then the S.I. popped past and gave us the silent signal to follow. Obediently, we fell in behind.

#

Don't ever quote me, but a three-klick run at dawn is real good for flushing the sludge out of your headworks. I was feeling alertness, total, by the time we got to the airstrip, so just before we ducked into the briefing shack I caught a shadow glimpse of the ground crew rolling out a helo and confirmed what I'd pretty much inferenced. This wasn't standard character-building harassment; we were doing The Colonel's Game, elimination round.

The briefing shed was lit, bright, and heavy with the smell of fresh coffee and doughnuts. A seriously pinholed tactical map covered most of the short wall opposite the door, and five small piles of name-tagged gear lay on the floor. I spotted mine, but before I could check it out the S.I. barked, "Attention!" and we snapped to. He walked past us, stern and inspecting, hooked himself a cup of coffee, sipped, grimmaced, added sugar ...

"This," the S.I. said at last, "in case you stupid sods haven't figured it out yet, is your Combat Survival Final Exam. In the next week we're going to find out what kind of stuff you're really made of.

"Whether you have the right," he sipped his coffee and eyed the doughnuts, covetous, "to call yourselves men, or if you're better off quitting the academy now and taking up hairdressing."

I flashed for a mo on this being an absolute perfect opportunity to flunk out and go home, but nah. It hadn't worked the first time I'd tried it, and I doubted Dad was any more receptive to the idea. It'd been over three years since I'd disappeared him, but the last letter I'd gotten from Mom said the Sears charge account was still buggered up.

Thinking about Dad's fight with Sears, I flashed a little half-smile. I

take my victories where I can get them.

Lucky for me I caught the smile and toggled it off before the S.I. spotted it. Oblivious, he pulled a collapsible pointer out of his breast pocket, extended it, and turned to face the map. "This square—," he

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used the pointer to trace around the red yarn perimeter, "—is the ComSurEx grid. Sixty-four square kilometers of wilderness; as you can see, it's mainly timber, some meadow, a small lake in the center. We drop you at roughly these points—," he tapped a pentagram inside the square, "—4 klicks apart." He slurped his coffee, then turned to us. "Scenario: You're down in nonfriendly territory. You have the clothes on your back, a used 'chute, and the basic survival kit. Your job is to survive for seven days while neutralizing all nonfriendlies you meet. This means each other; there are no friendlies in ComSurEx!"

Putting down his coffee cup, he picked up a thick plastic ring, flat green color, from my pile. "You'll all be wearing tracking collars. They uplink to NavSat and constantly relay your position—," he looked at me, smirk cocked, "—so we can recover your body when you flunk."

I stonefaced. He gave me one of his near-imperceptible eyebrow arches and continued.

"They're also how you score a takeout." With a little creaking sound he twisted the collar open, then put it around my neck and snicked it shut. "There's a wimp switch on the collar," he said, fingering a pull-tab under my chin. "To waste someone, yank his switch. This means you have to get close enough for hand-to-hand, and you have to win at handto-hand, and that brings up the first verboten: no knife fights! Too much paperwork when we send a cadet home in pieces." Murphy giggled. The S.I. glared at him, stern, and he shut up.

"We call it a wimp switch because, if you're injured or you want to quit, you can yank your own." To me personal he added, "I'll bet a brainy guy like you has lots of experience yanking your own."

To the others he said, "If the switch goes, you're dead. Worse, you flunk and have to take my course over again." He spun around and jabbed me in the chest with the pointer, shortening it a few inches. "We

all know how eager you are to do that, don't we Harris?"

"Yessir." Conditioned response. Can't help it.

"Oh," he added, casual, "taking the collar off pops the switch, of course."

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He turned to the map and traced the square with his pointer. "I'd also advise against trying to leave the grid. The Grade Fives are conducting containment exercises along the perimeter. If they catch you running, they'll beat the piss out of you. They don't like cowards."

The S.I. clasped his hands behind his back and resumed his swagger. "You have two advantages over real soldiers: I gave you time to get your boots on, and you won't be making the actual drop. You can thank some gutless lawpimp for that: The family of that clumsy fool who broke his hip last month has filed suit. So no more low-visibility vertical insertions. For now." He smiled, crocodilian. "Questions?"

Doug Luger stepped forward, chest puffed, chin jutting out like the bow of the battleship Maine. "Sir! How come Cadet Harris is fully dressed, sir?" In my head I filed a priority to someday thank Luger proper for that question.

"Well?" the S.I. asked me, sharp.

The true/true answer was mom'd sent me the jumpsuit for Christmas, and I'd been wearing it to bed ever since the February night Luger decided I was an overeducated smartass and convinced my bunkies that a bare-butt snowdrifting would improve my attitude. I settled for, "I always sleep in a jumpsuit, sir."

"I believe I'll check that out," the S.I. said, and gave me his best Menacing Glare w/Implied Crucifixion. Then, as there were no more questions, he ordered us to mount up.

#

The sun's big red eye was just starting to peek over the horizon when we lifted out. At first we flew due east, which was s'posed to disorient us, then we cut back west-northwest. I tried to talk to Buchovsky and gave up 'cause of the fierce rotor noise, but as I strapped

on my canteen I caught a garble of Luger and Kao Vang arguing. The disturber was hearing Vang clearly say, “No, I get to take Harris out!” Before I could overhear more, the S.I. squeezed into our compartment and bellowed, “Listen up! This is a combat test! If I catch you cooperating, you both flunk! Understood?” Luger and Kao Vang

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were still shouting, “Sir! Yes, sir!” when the helo slowed to a hover and a crewman yanked the main hatch open. As we yawed around, I did a quick scan.

A smudge of smoke rising through the pines far to the southeast marked the academy, the only sign of human life horizon to horizon. We were maybe two klicks west-southwest of the lake, coming down over a clearing the size of a hot tub. No way, no way we were putting down in that; I decided the bit about not doing a jump was just another disorienter and cussed the S.I. for it. Then the crewman latched a rope to the hook above the door.

So we weren’t chuting in. We were rappelling. Big fritzing improvement.

The S.I. smirked around at us, handed Murphy a pair of heavy leather gloves, and said, “You first.” Murphy looked at the rope enthusiastic as a man being offered a seriously annoyed live rattlesnake, and the S.I. shouted, “Wait!” Murphy started breathing again.

“Forgot to mention!” the S.I. continued. “Tularemia season! Don’t eat rabbit!” He pushed the rope into Murphy’s hands and gave him the boot.

We waited just long enough to see if Murphy could get up and walk. He did, so five minutes later we dropped Buchovsky due south of the lake, and another five minutes after that we were over the southeast drop point and I was gloved, at the hatch, holding line. Luger and Kao Vang were grinning like they’d finally settled who got drumstick and who got white meat, and the S.I. was chucking me under the chin and shouting, “Remember! Wimp switch!” when he tried to give me the boot, but I jumped out before his foot connected and he almost—almost, dammit—

lost his balance and pitched out with me.

They didn't wait to see if I could walk, I noticed.

#

As the helo clattered away north, I tried to collect wits and toggle off my Immediate Compliance mindset. That's one of cyberpunking's permanent side effects, I guess; you start out putzing around with a

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computer for what you can do to it, and pretty soon it's filled your head with binary paradigms and thinkspace partitions.

This time, though, I was having lots of trouble switching off the military mode, and for one big hairy reason: Luger. All semester long I'd been praying he'd get detailed into someone else's ComSurEx. We'd been feeding an attitude clash ever since the Peloponnesian Wars, and it'd grown up to be a True Hate.

Made good strategic from his viewpoint, I suppose. Objectification, again: The quick path to status is to find the outsidish geek in the group and add a new wrinkle to the usual geek-dumping that goes on. Roid Rogers did a real good job of flagging me as the designated class dump.

By the time Luger came back to the Academy there was a comfy Torturer's Assistant niche just waiting for an occupant, and when Rogers graduated at the end of my second Grade One year it was perfect CPO (Cake, Piece Of) for Luger to pick up his fallen banner and carry on.

But I for one was tired of gravel in my food, ants in my toothpaste, and flunking inspection because that zut-head had used my footlocker for a chamber pot. I was real tired of living full-time in tight-zipper jumpsuits so's to avoid a repeat of amateur proctoscopy night with Mengele Junior. Someday soon I needed to zero the account but good!

This started to damper the fear a bit. Maybe ComSurEx was a good time for settling up? Out here, in the woods, with no staffers between us and permission—orders, even—to do anything short of wasting the sucker?

Hmm, maybe. Kao Vang was along too, though. I'd gotten both Deke Luger and his best apprentice brownshirt, and it sounded like they

were planning an epic geek-dump for me. Still, if I could separate them...

No plan on how to do that just yet, though. I pushed the issue on the stack, hoping an idea would pop off if I gave it enough time, and started checking out my gear.

My canteen was empty. The “basic survival kit” turned out to be a roll of sterile gauze, a tupperware of water decon pills, and the seriously

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wicked sheath knife all upperclassmen carry. Unscrewing the buttcap of the knife, I found about a dozen matches and a compass that claimed the sun rose in the south. That’s how you keep cadets from going walkaway, I suppose. Nothing in the BSK looked even remotely like food.

I cut off the negative think right there. No water, at least, I could do something about. Taking a rough bearing from the sun, I headed northwest to find the lake. Along the way, to pump my attitude, I started prioritizing my positive situationals.

Positive: It was real ratty and I wouldn’t step into air with it, but the thing in my parachute bag was definitely a squarechute. With work, I could have a decent tent.

Positive: Buchovsky had the drop point just to my west. I had a shade less than zero respect for Buchovsky; he’d won his Academy scholarship by pursuing advanced studies in recreational pharmacy, and I suspect he smoked a major slice of his headchips in the process. All us cadets lived and breathed the Colonel’s Number One Rule (“Keep your head down”), but in the two years since he’d come to the Academy I’d never once seen Buchovsky put his head up.

I stopped walking for a mo, listened for the helo, and took a guess at elapsed realtime: Ten minutes. By now Buchovsky’d be gone to ground so hard they’d have to backhoe him out. He was no threat to me.

Murphy, then? No, Murphy was hostile, but stupid. More dangerous to himself than anyone else. I finished running my preliminary threat assessment and decided I only needed to worry about Luger and Kao Vang.

That’s when I shut that line of thought off cold. I wanted to keep

fixated on positives.

Positive: It didn't matter who had the drop point just north of me.

Doug Luger and Kao Vang would link up (Rules? What rules?) before

they started hunting me. That bought me some extra time.

Positive: Because of some weird idea about fairness I was trying not

to think about it too much, but I had a dozen G-ration bars zipped into

my jumpsuit pockets. Hey, I never said Luger was wrong when he called

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me a smartass, did I?

Then I got the bottom of my positives list and the last item turned

out to be something of a puzzler, even for me. So I found a fallen tree,

kicked it to scare out the occupants (none found), and sat down to think

it over. Unzipping my jumpsuit, I reached down to my deepest, most

secure, hidden inside pocket and whipped out—

My trusty old Starfire 600 microportable computer.

Whipped it out, and looked at it, and wondered why the hell I'd

packed it along. Oh sure, part of it was basic fear of my bunkies going

on a find-'n'-trash mission while I was gone. I'd seen what they'd done

to Buchovsky's stillvid camera and Murphy's analog guitar. Real early

on, I picked up on how the staffers looked the other way while your

bunkies destroyed whatever it was made you different from a standardissue

skinhead. That's their job, after all, turning normal kids into

faceless guys in dangerous green. It'd been over two years since

Lewellyn's successor booted me out of the library, and I didn't get much

chance to use my Starfire anymore, but it was still in perfect operating

condition and I considered that a victory, major.

I flipped up the waferscreen, opened the keyboard wings, and ran

my fingers over the touchpads. The batteries were at full charge; the

factory ROMware was intact and useful as ever. ("Take a memo, Miss

Jones: Twelve six-hundred-calorie ration bars consumed over seven

days yields an average daily caloric intake of 1028.5714, so Harris will

lose weight this week, but how much? What if we pie-chart out a sweat

coefficient of...") I took another few minutes to verify the bubbleware

I'd written in myself. The curvilinear interpolations, polar equations, Poisson distribution, chi-square test--yep, still there. The wicked little crackersys and bandit commware that'd won me this scholarship to Auschwitz North? Of course. Didn't look like a promising place to find a network to plug into, though.

The battery charge indicator ticked down to 99%.

After a few minutes of keystroking I decided that sitting on the log was getting me two steps short of nowhere, so I closed up the Starfire,

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tucked it back inside, and continued my trudge to the lake.

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Chapter 14

The lake was one of your standard shallow, rocky, weedy affairs. The map back in the briefing shed showed a good-sized marsh along the east shore; when I got a look at it, I decided the marsh was even better than advertised. Luger and Kao Vang'd have to either cross it or circle it, and either way'd buy me considerable more time. Using some gauze to filter out the big bits, I kneeled down and started filling my canteen. While the water blurped in, I flagged on some small fish—bluegills, I think—watching me from the reeds, which was another promising sign. The ration bars'd get me through the week, but it helped to have backup food located.

The last air bubbled out of the canteen. I stood up, popped in a decon tablet, capped the canteen, and started shaking it. Fish, huh? How did the S.I. say you catch fish?

He didn't. He spent all his time talking about neutralizing nonfriendlies, and never got around to fish. Maybe if the academy'd been built somewhere where the fish were well-armed and unrepentant Leninists...

So did the handbook say anything?

Yeah. It said if you were stupid enough to leave your rifle and fishing pole behind whenever you were "at risk of participating in a

survival experience" (i.e., when leaving your home/bunker to buy ammunition, food, krugerrands, or the latest issue of Soldier of Fortune), you could pry off the brass end cap of your military-style web belt, spin out a few feet of thread, and improvise a gorge lure from the brass.

I looked down at my belt, fondling the fused black plastic end.

Except for dress greens, nobody wears brass anymore. They say the ChiComms have a targeting radar that can lock in on a metal belt buckle at two klicks, stick an I-frag right in your belly button. I spent a minute thinking about the updates I'd someday put in the handbook.

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Which was truly bad tactical. 'Cause while I was standing there shaking the canteen and thinking edits, concurrent with searching my head for something to help me outsmart those little fish with their teeny tiny little primitive brains, Luger came down to the opposite shore, spotted me, and got a fix on my position. The first I knew about it was when his voice came braying and echoing across the lake, "Ha-a-r-r-r-is! I'm coming to ge-e-t-t y-o-o-u!"

Zutcakes! I dropped my canteen, scooped it up again, lit out into the trees; charged up the lake bank, through some scrub pine, plowing into a raspberry patch and through it, then diving into the high grass—

A hundred yards later, face stinging from whipped branches, my hands scratched and bleeding from the raspberry thorns, I finally beat down my teeny tiny little primitive brain and pushed it back into its partition, then asked myself the big question: Why are you running?

'Cause I'm scared, is why! 'Cause two years of threats and bullying and rabbit punches in the dark have paid off. Luger has me programmed for scared pissless and he has me programmed thorough!

That's when the little voice in my head started telling me I was an idiot for even thinking about taking Luger out. No staffers to buffer us was his advantage! The full-contact rules meant there was almost no limit on what he could do to me, especially with Kao Vang to perform for! My ComSurEx mission wasn't going to be zeroing Luger's account.

It was going to be true surviving.

Think, think, think! I beat the panic back down again and tried to fudge up some plans. First instinct was to do a fast fade west, into Buchovsky's territory, and keep moving. With luck and a head start, they'd just chase me around the lake for a week.

No, I ran it in my head and it didn't work. They'd stick to the shore; I'd take to the woods for cover, and my path'd be lots longer then theirs. A flat-out run'd burn calories, too, and waste water. All they'd have to do's stay between me and the lake and pick me off when I came down to refill my canteen.

I kept trying to kickstart my cyberpunk mindset, but it just sputtered

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and died. The parachute? It'd have to go; I didn't need the extra weight, and no point making a camp without a palisade around it and an army to defend it. I hid the 'chute pack as best I could in the tall grass.

What next? I didn't know, dammit, I didn't know! I needed a process, a plan, a really good piece of strategic think! I needed something to stuff into the mouth of that voice that kept yelling, "Forget thinking, Harris! RUN!"

I needed more information, is what I needed. Kludging together a working set of nerves, I started hiking northeast, right into the mouth of the beast.

Block that thought, and fixate on the marsh. You need to learn more about the marsh. Never mind what's on the other side. Thinksing a drill chant to keep the feet moving.

Lions and tigers and bears, oh my!

Lions and tigers and bears, oh my!

#

By noon I'd scouted enough to know they'd have to be nuts to try crossing the marsh. Instead they'd circle it, go way east; this started to suggest the kernel of an idea to me. Maybe what I needed wasn't a regurge of my military strategies classes, but some good ol' cyberpunky role-playing gamethink. How does Luger think my mind works?

Easy. Luger's paradigm of Harris is a frightened, wimpy, "invertebrate coward" (Luger wouldn't know the difference 'tween that

and inveterate) who'd be scared irrational, run west. If Luger could just stay on his heels, keep him moving, run him down...

Inference: Luger'd worry about the time he lost to circling the marsh. He'd cut corners, beeline from the east end of the marsh to the last contact point on the south shore of the lake. If I tucked myself up near the edge of the marsh and went subtle for a day or two, he'd go right past me. If he was real good at tracking, he might get to the contact point and find I doubled back, but by that time I'd be behind him.

Which opened up a whole new range of interesting possibilities.

The rest of the day was a tense unevent. When the hungries got too

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bad, I took a bite of ration bar and munched it slow. Otherwise, I spent my time scouting for more food backups and an invisible place to sleep.

The food prospecting was a total waste. The berries weren't in season, and I didn't find anything else I wanted to stick in my mouth. The bed hunt went better, and towards dusk I carefully, tracklessly, worked my way back to a thick patch of ferns, burrowed deep into the middle, and settled down for a good night's sleep.

I should have known better.

Me and the deerflies had been having a running skirmish all day, but after dark the bugs hit in battalion strength. Black flies, gnats, mosquitoes the size of hummingbirds—a few hours of futile swatting, and I pulled up my hood, zipped shut everything with a zipper, tried to internalize, and found my hungry tummy sitting there waiting to have a word with me. The stomach and I argued for a while about whether I should eat another ration bar, until the feel of little buggy feet on my skin got so bad I pulled out the Starfire, filled the display with 80 columns by 24 rows of 8 (you'd be amazed how much light that makes), and risked fifteen minutes' light picking wood ticks off.

By the time I was done debugging, sleep was truly unreachable. Each twitching hair and flowing bead of sweat became a tick crawling up my back, and I drove myself so nuts trying to find the little bastards that I finally started diddling with the computer, just to keep from

thinking about the bugs getting fat on my blood.

I word-processed some changes for the survival handbook. I crunched some numbers to estimate how many mosquitoes I'd swat before ComSurEx was over (132,775). I wrote a little assembly program that did nothing in particular. Truth to tell, two years of only using the computer in secret had left my cyberskills a lot rustier than I liked. It started to annoy me that I couldn't think of anything fun to do with the Starfire, until I saw the charge indicator tick down to 85% and realized that even boring stuff would be impossible when the batteries croaked. So I shut if off and lay there in the dark, wondering again why I'd brought it along.

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It had something to do with defiance. After a couple years of Sunday morning assembly, I'd flag that one of Colonel Ernst Von Schlager's favorite rags was technology. He could stand up there for hours tirading on some new weapon the Pentagon was buying and why it wouldn't work. (For reference, the only time I ever saw the Colonel look happy was when he was teaching hoplite shield-and-spear drill. In a dream once I saw him standing before Philip of Macedon saying, "Look, these iron swords rust, they're brittle, and on top of that we'll have a serious window of vulnerability while we retrain our troops. I say, stick with bronze.")

After one of the colonel's recent rants, some poor Grade Five ballsed up enough to pop the question I'd been muttering ever since I arrived at the Academy. "Sir? The Real Army uses portable computers for tactical decision assist, sir," he'd said. "How come we aren't training on TactiComps, sir?"

The answer he got was classic Von Schlager. The colonel said—bellowed, actually—"Computers? Soldiers don't need computers? Soldiers need guns that don't jam at thirty below! Soldiers need bayonets that stay sharp when they hit bone! You want computers? Those damn boxes aren't half as useful as a good dry pair of socks!"

Then he knocked the cadet down a full grade for asking questions.

A sad case. Five years at the academy and the kid still hadn't learned the true meaning of Keep Your Head Down.

Anyway, that's when I decided to pack the Starfire, I guess.

Between it and my basic personal smarts, I got this idea that I'd cobble up something during ComSurEx that'd prove computers are useful in the field, win me campwide undying respect, and maybe even get me a grunt of admiration from the colonel. I mean, I was gonna stand him on his fritzin' ear!

As soon as I came up with a good idea.

Meantime...meantime...I fell asleep.

#

I thought it was a nightmare, but the voice stayed with me after I

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woke up. A cloudy dawn was just breaking, and I was cold, damp, stiff—and listening to the S.I. "Had enough yet, Harris?" he whispered, sibilant and close to my ear. "Ready to wimp out?" I blinked the sleep out of my eyes and looked around. How had that mofo found me?

"We both know you won't make it," he said, smug, "so why not yank the switch now? Just think of your dick; I'm sure it'll seem familiar."

It was the damned collar! Not only did it have telemetry, it had a voice channel, too!

"Well, Harris? Aren't you man enough to even answer?"

Two-way voice? There had to be some way I could use that. But first, I worked up my most gutteral and said, "Listen, scrotum-face. I'm gonna beat this damn game, and then I'm gonna come back and stick this collar right up your—" The faint hiss of the carrier faded out. He'd had his jolly little torment; he wasn't listening anymore.

Still, he'd given me new data to chew on. The collar supported twoway voice and did it without an antenna, so it must bounce signal off NavSat. I already knew about the telemetry uplink; suppose it had a downlink they weren't using? Was this my answer? Was it time to open a new high frontier in cyberhacking?

I started feeling around my neck. The academy never bought electronics that weren't Military Specification. If the collar was simple enough for MilSpec, I could probably override the wimp switch and take it off without trouble. Then I'd get into the wiring and use the Starfire to tap NavSat for a precise locational on Luger.

Yeah, I could try it. But why bother? When Luger was close enough to be a threat, I'd be able to see him, hear him, smell him. If he was across the marsh, I didn't need to locate him any more precise than that.

The colonel's Number Two Rule was, "Never call a napalm strike for a one-bullet job." I stopped futzing with the collar, slithered out of my fern patch, and set off to do a brief morning scout.

#

By nightfall I was starting to feel safe. Except for two quick scouts

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that didn't turn up any sign of headhunters, I'd spent the whole day lying low and letting the deerflies teach me stoicism. The gamethink was going pretty good, I figured; by my reckoning Luger and Kao Vang were now klicks away and getting tired and hungry. I pictured the looks on their faces when they realized my trail was circling all over the place, and started to giggle.

Aw, hell. Truth to hell, I was feeling smug!

The only fly in my thick 'n' creamy gloat was I still couldn't get the good ideas to stop skulking around in the back of my mind and step into the light where I could see them. Best thought I'd had all day was a vague regret that it wasn't Luger who had the Starfire. Given the chips inside it, even with Class-B shielding it'd radiate noise on the 32-megahertz band when it was working. If Luger had the computer and I had a truly decent radio direction finder...

Like I said, no really good ideas.

Still, my unaugmented brain wasn't doing too bad. Shutting off the Starfire—it was down to 70% charge now—I crawled out of my ferns and hiked down to the marsh to refill my canteen. Pushing through a clump of scrubby oak, I walked straight into Luger and Kao Vang.

For a few stretchy Salvador Dali clock ticks I froze, staring at those

two standing there twenty yards away and half-covered with mud, not believing they'd actually been stupid enough to cross the marsh. Then they reacted, yelled, charged. And Luger, crazy Luger, drew his knife!

It worked! His fear program was still in my system; I broke, I ran. Heart pounding, blood clanging in my ears, I ran. Dark was falling; I picked up a cloud of hungry gnats. Beating at the gnats, waving my arms like a spastic, I ran. What stopped me, finally, was catching my foot on something and skidding my face into the dry dirt and pine needles.

Blackout.

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Chapter 15

Metal taste of blood strong in my mouth.

Breath coming back in short, ragged gasps.

At first I was afraid to know, then I felt out the cut lip with my tongue and realized it wasn't critical. I had scrapes on my palms and face and a cluster of aches that'd be major bruises soon, but the bloody nose was slowing up and nothing else felt dangerous. I opened my eyes.

Correction: My eyes were open. My eyes were open in a dense forest under an overcast night sky, dark as the inside of a cow.

When eyes are useless, ears get big. Swallowing hard, I held my breath and listened to the blood pounding in my ears, to the pop and crunch of dry needles settling underneath me, to the scuttle of things in the dark.

Nothing that sounded like cadets' boots, though. I started breathing again. Think, dammit, think! The gameplan is totally down the tubes!

Thinking went nowhere because my head was seriously garbaged with unanswerables: Had I given Luger and Kao Vang the shake-off? Should I keep moving? Or stay put? What is that scratching sound off to my left? Should I head east? Did Luger think I'd try another misdirecter, or would he think I'd think he thought—

"ARGH!" I screamed pure frustration and tried to jump up, but the knife-sharp pain in my ankle knocked me right back down again. When the searing white subsided, I realized sudden I'd hacked into a whole

new level of trouble with a capital T and that rhymes with B and that stands for “Boy, you are in trouble!” Gingerly, I crawled off a ways until I found a big tree, then dragged myself around to sit with my back against it. If they were nuts enough to be hunting me in the dark—and they’d already proven they were nuts—at least maybe they wouldn’t trip

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over me. My ankle was starting to swell up bad, so I tore open the velcro and loosened my boot.

By and by the pain receded, and feeling too rotten even to swat bugs, I dozed off. Along about 3 a.m., it started to drizzle.

#

I thought a lot about my wimp switch that night, and on into the next morning. No matter how I stacked the variables, it was the path that made sense. I was wet, cold, and miserable; my gamethink hadn’t worked; Luger and Kao Vang were now somewhere real close by (I figured half a klick), and I’d given them a good trail to follow; and my ankle, while not broken, was so sprained I could barely walk. I had done my last runaway. The question no longer was whether I could take them out, but whether I could cheat them of the fun of taking me out.

Anybody with smarts would have agreed it was situation hopeless and opted for the bailout.

I could even see the look on the S.I.’s face. He’d smirk down at me and say, “See, Harris? I knew you wouldn’t make it. You’ll never get out of the academy. You’ll never even pass my class.”

And that’s when something clicked. Deep inside me, some little partition of my thinkspace that I hadn’t used in three years suddenly went real gritty. No, dammit! You are not out of this until you say so! You’re so balled up with what could happen you’re not thinking about what you can do!

I could still move. I could still set an ambush. When it got bright, I got to my feet, hobbled along slowly until I found a fallen branch I could use for a crutch, then hobbled along a little faster.

#

I’d only gone half a klick or so when I heard Kao Vang coming up behind me, crashing through the undergrowth like an impatient elephant and swearing at the top of his lungs. Okay, they were trying to drive me. (Odd tactical, I thought, given they were only two people.) I hadn’t gotten as far as I’d hoped, hadn’t found the spot I was really looking for, but I could still make a good show of Harris’s Last Stand. A fair-sized

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tree stood alongside the trail; I got behind it and crouched down low. Holding my crutch like a bat, tensing my muscles, I shut off all pain inputs from my ankle and concentrated on how good it would feel to take one of them with me.

Kao Vang never saw it coming. He stomped past the tree, still swearing at the top of his lungs; I swung my crutch around so hard it broke across his shins. For a moment he had the most startled expression I’ve ever seen, and then he let out a real satisfying painful bellow, collapsed like a wet dishrag, and I was on top of him, grabbing his collar, groping for his wimp switch—

No pull-tab. It was already gone.

“Goddammit Harris!” he yelled when he figured out what was going on, “that hurt!” He wasn’t fighting back, I noticed. And once the hand-to-hand rush ebbed, I also noticed he didn’t have his knife, canteen, or far that matter most of his clothes. “Harris,” he said with forced calm, “it’s okay. Honest mistake. I’m not mad.” He lifted his chin, to show me the empty pull-tab socket. “I’m dead, see?”

I rolled off and let him sit up. He started rubbing his shins. “What happened?” I asked.

“Fuggin’ Deke took me out!” he spat. I looked him in the face and dumped off some disbelief. “No zut! Goddam S.I. woke us this morning—you know they have two-way voice on these fuggin’ collars?—said it was his last warning to split up. Right then and there, fuggin’ Deke reaches over and yanks my switch!” Kao Vang calmed down slightly, looked at me, and asked, “Say, can I have a drink? That barf-brain took my canteen.”

I unhooked mine, unscrewed the cap, and handed it over. He took a deep drink, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, said, “Thanks.” Another swig, and he added, “I tried to pull his switch, but the dead can’t take out the living. Fuggin’ pull-tab locks. So I slugged him, and the slimeball pulled his knife. Made me hand over my canteen, my clothes, my... “ He shrugged, and gestured at himself. “See? Everything but boots, undies, and compass.” He looked at me, appraising. “You got

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anything to eat? I haven’t eaten in three days.”

Damn him for reminding me! My stomach growled in sympathy.

“Where you going?” I asked, changing the subject.

“The S.I. radioed after my switch went. Congratulated Deke on his fuggin’ clean kill, gave me a heading for the Grade Five camp, told me to hike out! Speaking of which...” Vang started to look around in the weeds. I helped, and in a minute we found his compass. He took another hit on the canteen. “I told Deke we shoulda gone ‘round the marsh, but no-o! We couldn’t find jack squat to eat, and then all our matches got soaked. I was so hungry yesterday I caught a frog. Ever try to eat raw frog?”

“You checked your compass?” I asked. “Mine is off by ninety degrees.”

“No zut?” He looked at his; I unscrewed mine and handed it over. He looked at them both, frowned, swore some more. “You mean I been walking south when ... ? Thanks, Harris.” He handed my compass back to me. “Y’know, if you can just stay loose another day or two, Deke won’t have time to hunt you. He’ll be too busy looking for something he can eat. God, what I wouldn’t give right now for a steak! I’d even settle for one of those hockey pucks the mess hall calls—”

“Vang?” I asked. “Shut up. Just, shut up.”

He got to his feet, pretending to look at a watch. “Well, I simply must get going,” he said, oozing sarcasm. “Places to be, people to meet, y’know. Say, if you get back to the academy alive, we’ll just have to do lunch some—

“Vang?” I asked again. When I got his attention, I pulled out a ration

bar and threw it to him.

He looked at it a minute, then grinned. “Harris, you are something else.” He offered me a hand up, and that’s when he noticed my ankle.

“Oo, that’s bad,” he said after he checked it out. “You considered bailing out?”

I shook my head. “It’s down to me and Luger now. I might actually have a chance.”

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He smiled wry. “You’re crazy.” Then he started peeling the wrapper off the ration bar. “No, I take that back. You’re a weird kind of twonk, Harris, but you’re okay. Now Deke, he’s crazy.” Vang took a bite out of the bar and tried to snicker with a full mouth. “Y’know, he thinks you’re gonna double-back again and he’ll outfox you by going due east?”

I considered that data worth another ration bar and gave it to Vang.

After finishing both bars and washing down the crumbs with a swig from my canteen, he did me an incredible good turn and cut a strong staff to replace the one I’d broken across his shins. We hiked half a klick together, and when his last try at talking me into bailing out failed, he split off to find the Grade Five camp by dead reckoning.

Ten steps down the path he stopped and turned around. “Say, Mike? There’s something I should tell you. Deke’s trying to carve a bow; say’s he’s going to risk tularemia and hunt rabbits. I don’t think he’s sharp enough to make one that really works, but if he does, I wouldn’t put it past him to take a potshot at you. Be careful, okay?”

“See you back at camp,” I answered, cheerful. A good plan, a really good piece of tactical and gamethink was coming to me at last. For the first time in three days I was starting to feel confident.

Vang waved, then headed east; I went west. Progress was slow ‘cause of my ankle, but faster than before because I was taking a straight line and knew exactly where I was going. By dark I’d found my chute again. Rolling myself up in the camouflage fabric, I settled in for a comfy night of resting and stepwise refinement of my plan.

#

Day Four dawned perfect and clear, all calm blue skies and sunshine. Even the birds seemed really pleased with it. In five minutes I'd limped back down to the lake and was refilling my canteen. The little fish were still there.

Odd, how in the end it all came back to a question of catching fish.

Unzipping my jump suit, I pulled out my Starfire and hefted it.

Flipped up the wafer display, checked the power indicator; it still held 55% charge. Maybe there was still time to think of a brilliant piece of

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programming?

Nah. I poked through the weeds at the water's edge until I found a precision circuitry conversion tool, or as we call 'em in the profession, a big fuggin' rock. Diodes, resistors; the Starfire was just full of shiny little lure-like things.

Late in the afternoon, I cleared a firebreak and built a greenwood fire so big even Luger couldn't miss it. Loaded on lots of fresh, resiny pine branches; the smoke rose up in the still sky like a big arrow saying, "You are here!" If Luger was where Vang said he was going—and I didn't doubt Vang anymore— at best speed it'd take him five, maybe six hours to come to me. I was counting on him showing up well after dark.

I checked the 'chute-fabric decoy tent one more time, then started whittling my staff down to a nasty sharp spearpoint. Just about dusk, I spitted a bunch of fish, set them far enough from the fire so that they'd cook slow, and slithered into my blind.

Sounds cocky don't it? Truth was, I was still scared stiffless; the whole plan hinged on two assumptions. One was that Luger'd be using his stomach instead of his brain. Given how hungry Vang was, and given that Luger had forty more pounds of body mass to feed, I felt pretty good about this one.

The second assumption, though, was the one that would get me real hurt if I was wrong. It was convoluted double-gamethink: Luger's paradigm of me ran on a heavy mix of fear and wimpishness. But how did he weight my hate for the academy? And did his paradigm allow for

me being scared reckless, scared crazy? If it came to a crunch, did he think my core personality was a totally gutless wimp or a terrified nutcase who'd do anything to get away from him?

Time to find out. And the throbbing in my ankle said I only got one chance.

#

A few hours after dark, in the bloody red light coming from the last coals of the dying fire, I spotted Luger circling around in the shadows and checking out my camp. He was wearing Kao Vang's black jammies

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and carrying a crude bow and a couple arrows, with one nocked and ready to shoot. Trying his best to be wary, cunning, he slipped from tree to tree, drawing closer to the tent.

With luck, he wouldn't get close enough to see the trash in it wasn't me.

My luck held. Suddenly, he stopped. Sniffed. Turned his head from side to side like a radar targeter, zeroing in on the broiled fish still spitted over the coals.

Another of the colonel's sayings goes, "If a real war ever starts, all the sophisticated weapons will be gone in a week. Then we'll be back to bows and arrows." I'd always wanted to argue with that one. A bow is a complex weapon: Takes practice to use it, two hands to hold it, and you have to put it down if you want to do something else.

Like eat.

Stealthy, Luger grabbed a fish and scuttled around to the side of the fire opposite the tent, where he crouched and started eating. Chomping and growling like a bag full of hungry cats, his hands full of greasy fish bits, he kept a nervous eye on the tent.

And his back to me.

Quiet as the pain in my ankle allowed, I crawled out of my blind, got to my feet, and crept up on him. He didn't see me coming until a nanosecond before I teed off into his ribs with the shaft of my spear.

Damn, he had good reflexes! Surprised, winded, knocked flat on his

back, he still managed to get hold of his knife. He was really good!

But not fast enough. Before he could get off his back I was standing over him, the point of my spear resting lightly in the hollow just below his adam's apple. The knife twitched, nervous, in his hand.

"Harris!" he gasped, trying to bluster but without cooperation from his voice. "The game's over, Harris! Let me pull your switch now and I won't hurt you!"

I let out what I hoped was a convincing hysterical cackle.

"Hurt me?" I laughed. "You miserable pusbag! You've been badgering me and buggering me for two years, and now you think I'm

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gonna roll over and die? This is where you pay, Luger!" I put a little weight behind the spear.

"Harris?" The bluster failed, so he tried reasonable. "This isn't like you; you don't wanna do this. You know what'll happen to you if you really hurt me?" His eyes were flickering like a pinball between bumpers, from me, to the knife, to the spear, to me.

"Yeah," I hissed, low and guttural. "They'll send me back to the States for trial. Oh, I'd hate that!" I licked my lips and tensed my arms, readying a thrust. "C'mon, try the blade! Give me an excuse, Luger!"

Luger might be a skinhead, but he's not completely stupid. With a careful sidehand, he threw the blade away. "What are your surrender terms?" he whispered.

#

Using shroud cord from the parachute, I trussed him up like a roasting pig. Tied his hands behind his back so he couldn't get hold of his wimp switch; tied his feet together so he couldn't run; tied a leash on his collar so I could keep him near by. Yeah, I fed him, too. I wanted him alive and healthy.

I just wish I coulda seen the look on the S.I.'s face the next morning, when he radioed to ask why Luger hadn't pulled my switch yet and found out what'd really happened. It must have totally ruined his voyeuristic little fun, 'cause he sent a helo that very afternoon to extract us.

Two days early. I'd set a new record for passing ComSurEx.

Not that it was a big graduating class. Murphy'd tried to go

walkaway and run into a bunch of Grade Fives; they buggered him up so

bad that his parents pulled him out of the academy and filed suit.

Buchovsky lost track of time and refused to come out on Day Seven; the

staffers had to send in a pshrink team to talk him out. Kao Vang had to

repeat that summer, of course, but Luger, because he was gutless enough

to get taken alive, went on the winter ComSurEx.

Me? Since I'd gone over two days without treatment, they couldn't

foam a walking cast around my ankle. Instead, I got an InquisitionCyberpunk

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surplus leg brace, a heroic-looking limp, and two months' excuse from

Phys Ed. Even better, I heard the colonel took what was left of my

Starfire, stuck it in a block of Lucite which he used for a doorstop, and

pronounced it the most useful computer he'd ever seen.

What I know is that the next Sunday, up in front of the entire

assembly, the Colonel gave me a handshake, a working compass, and the

knife I'd used on ComSurEx with my initials, MAH, engraved on the

blade in big Gothic letters. He also gave me a little bit of braid to stitch

on my greens.

I tried not to lord it over my ex-bunkies too much, though. We

Grade Threes were above that sort of thing.

Most of the time.

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Chapter 16

I was feeling good, real good, when I handed in my Physics final. It

was the kind of good comes from knowing you've just put in three bunbuster

weeks, covered a whole semester's worth of study, and done the

ace on one serious bitch of a test. I'd shown those mofos; I didn't win

ComSurEx on dumb luck! This kid Harris could be truly sharp, if he

wanted.

'Sides, it would've been a major embarasser to be the only Cadet

Grade Three still taking Academic Two classes.

So I'd taken the point; I'd done the long march. An ace on my Physics final—I was sure it was an ace—sitting alongside another ace in Algebra, a pyrrhic B in Military Science, a salvage job on History and a C with honor in Geography, and I damn near needed depleted uranium boots to keep my feet on the ground!

Long as I didn't think about my English final. Hey, grammar and spelling're what word crunchers are for, right? I'd done a badass job on my important classes, and I was walking tall when I handed in my blue book, saluted the instructor, and marched outa that lecture hall.

Some Grade One gopher with a complexion problem and a stick up his butt was waiting for me in the corridor. "Cadet Harris?" he yelped.

Why he had to ask I don't know; the nametape on every shirt I own shouts my name in letters two inches high. (Sometimes I fantasize getting all the cadets to swap shirts, just to see what'd happen. I suspect the whole system'd come crashing down like a glacier into the sea.)

"You Mike Harris?" the gopher shrilled again.

"Yo," I answered, feeling too good to give him crap about his protocol slip. I'd spent two years as a Grade One under Roid Rogers; I thought maybe the kid'd appreciate the break.

He handed me a speedmemo. "Cadet Harris, you are hereby ordered

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to report to Colonel Von Schlager's office on the double, sir!" He whipped off a salute that nearly put out his eye, spun around in a perfect 180o pivot, and went marching off heels clicking crisp and precise on the floor tiles. I changed my mind, and swore silent. What an opportunity I'd missed! Some people, I decided, thrive on protocol and deserve crap when they botch it.

Then I realized what he'd said, and I started to do the slow glacial crash. Omigod. I was being called into the Colonel's office. I'd been at the Academy long enough to know that old Von Schlager meagered out praise in assembly and shoveled out punishment in private. I couldn't think of anything bad I'd done in the last three weeks, but something

smelly must have hit the fan in a truly big way.

Well, nothing to do but hope he'd make it quick and relative painless. I spent just a moment considering rolling some other cadet to steal his shirt and name, then switched on the most pitiful limp I could manage and hobbled over to the Admin Building.

#

Colonel Ernst Von Schlager was a living myth, about on par with the Chimaera. You know, a fire-breathing brass-balled thing, and watch out for fangs. My handshake after ConSurEx was a real singularity; most times we low- and mid-grade cadets didn't see him at all, excepting his weekly rants on the quad and the occasional times he felt like doing pugil stick training. (Getting your brainpan bashed in by an old grizzle is in some respects very educational, but it doesn't tell you much about the guy on the other end of the stick.) The camp had been talking about my handshake for weeks now; seems right up to the second he let go some Grade Fours were betting he was just setting me up for a koshijutsu throw.

'Course, there were rumors about what the Colonel was like in private. One said he had a Grade Five political science class you got into only if he picked you, personal, and once you took it you understood everything. A variant of that said he believed the wrong side had won World War Two, and by the time you finished his class you'd believe it,

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too.

Then again, another rumor said he had his office decorated in chains and leathers, with his own private pillory in there and soundproof walls so you couldn't hear the screaming. And a third theory held he was really a closet case, and if you went into his office for a private session you'd sleep on your stomach for the rest of your life.

No, there was only one thing I knew for sure: I'd been called into the Colonel's office, and you didn't get called in unless you were in it deep. Stopping outside the door, I did the shoulder squaring and teeth gritting bit, then opened it and limped in.

Chomsky, the Colonel's adjutant, sent me right on into the inner office. Another bad sign; it meant I was the most important problem on Von Schlager's job stack. Whatever'd hit the fan was both smelly and huge. I advanced into the holy of holies, cap in hand, trying to keep open a line of retreat ...

The Colonel sat at his desk, toying with the Lucite block that held the remains of my Starfire. He didn't seem to notice me, so I took a moment to survey the terrain.

The office was barer than I expected. A plain dark walnut bookcase in the corner, a green blotter and a plastic photocube on the dark wood desk, a few plaques and a red velvet thing holding a bunch of medals on the wall. I tried to lean closer and cop a look at the brass.

"Aren't we forgetting something?" Von Schlager rumbled without looking up. Hasty, I snapped to attention and saluted.

"Sir! Cadet Harris reporting as ordered, sir!"

"That's better. At ease." He set down the Lucite block, opened a drawer and pulled out a manila folder, then looked up at me with a sour expression on his face. "I've been going over your file," he said, at last. "You were an Involuntary Admit. You flunked and repeated Grade One. All your instructors say you've got a severe attitude problem." His eyebrows went up as he read something in the folder, then he looked at me with an odd expression on his face. "It says here that you're a complete asshole."

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He tapped the paper and read out loud, "'Cadet Harris is smartmouthed, insolent, and in short, a complete asshole.'" He looked up at me, wonder in his eyes. "I've never seen that in someone's permanent record before." He closed the folder, dropped it on his desk, and looked up at me again. "Yet in the past month you've won a ComSurEx—in the process beating the S.I.'s favorite, I might add—and turned a midterm disaster into a solid B average. Can you explain this, Harris?"

"Sir, I—"

"That was a rhetorical question. You don't need to explain; I know

your type." He looked at the photocube and got a kind of faraway look.

"Oh, do I know your type."

He snapped back to the Here & Now.

"Harris, you might be surprised to learn that I did not found this Academy just to inflict wanton pain on young men." To himself he added, "Lord knows, some of the staff would be surprised to learn that."

Gentle, he touched one face of the photocube, then turned it around so I could see. The picture was of a slimey-looking 40-ish guy in a white polyester suit, smiling and leaning against a big white Cadillac, his pinky rings glittering in the sun.

"This is my son, Gary," Von Schlager said. "I founded the Academy to make up for all the mistakes I made raising him." The Colonel picked up the photocube and looked at it again.

"You're a lot like him, Harris. Smart, probably too smart for your own good. You get bored, and that's what gets you started into trouble. You don't think through to consequences, and that's what gets you in really deep.

"But dammit, you're smart enough to smarm your way out of it, and that's why you never learn!" He dropped the photocube, and looked at me.

"A lot of boys have come through here in the last fifteen years, Harris. Some of them have been very tough cases: boys the parents have given up on, boys who've gotten one too many slaps on the wrist from

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the JV courts. Boys who laugh at all authority. Some of them have been real yahoos." He looked sharp at me, flagged my blank expression, and stabbed a finger down on his intercom box. "Chomsky!" he barked out, "Remind me to add Gulliver's Travels to the required reading list!"

Back to me. "But, Harris, this academy has managed to turn most of these basket cases into pretty decent men. I'm proud to say that 90 percent of my boys are accepted for Officer Candidate School. Ninety percent!"

He calmed down. "I think this proves my point: I know how to deal

with your type. The ComSurEx was a good start. What you need next is a problem so big you can't luck into a solution or beat it with panache alone. A challenge so big it'll either catalyze your sense of responsibility or stomp you into a little, wet, greasy smear."

He smiled at me, dangerous. Suddenly I flagged there were all kinds of secret things loaded in that smile, and I wasn't going to like any of them. "The lesson of ComSurEx," he said, soft, "is that you, and you alone, are ultimately responsible for your success or failure. For the last three weeks I've been trying to think of a way to make sure you've learned that lesson." Yeah, I could see now he'd been thinking about it, all right. Now that it was too late to run and hide. The Colonel rested his left hand on the intercom box, gave me one last evil smile, then thumbed down the intercom button. "Chomsky, it's time. Send in Captain Nuttbruster."

Nuttbruster? Zutcakes! I never even heard a rumor about this guy, and that was maximum bad sign! From the name I could just picture him: some steroid-soaked sadist with a black belt in Abusive Education and a fondness for gelding straps!

"While we're waiting," the Colonel said offhand, and he tossed a copy of Leatherneck magazine at me. It was open to a full-page picture of two eyes peeking out from a bulbous wraparound head bucket.

"That's the Mark 32 helmet," he explained. "Full voice and data comm, built-in snapshot radar, laser rangefinder, and sonar motion detectors. Audio enhancers that can learn to filter out friendly noise and recognize

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an unfriendly heartbeat at a hundred yards."

He reached across the desk and tapped the picture. "The faceplate is a gas and bioagent filter, and if you flip down the visor, you get IR vision and tactical map overlays." The colonel looked at the picture again, then sat back in his chair and snorted.

"In two years that helmet is going to be standard issue for infantry, Harris. For common infantry!" He screwed his face up into a nasty grimmace, and laughed, sort of. "You know how I feel about

technology. War is a nasty, brutal business, and I seriously doubt the value of all of this crap. But what you did during ComSurEx got me thinking.

"Harris, I will never go so far as to admit I was wrong, but maybe I haven't been 100 percent right. If it ever comes down to shooting, you boys are going to be fighting with M-4 hovertanks, Yamato Land Battleships, and M-830 Explosive Foxhole Diggers. Maybe I'm not doing you any favors by running a low-tech curriculum."

The inner door creaked open, and I jumped half out of my skin. Nuttbruster already? Lord, take me now! But no, it was just some thin, spectacled old wheeze, so I detensioned a notch.

The wheeze tottered into the room, dragged his right arm up into a tired salute, and said, "Captain Nuttbruster reporting as ordered, sir." I wish I could have been outside of myself, watching the expression on my face. It must have been hilarious. Nuttbruster? Him?

The Colonel stood. "Cadet Harris, this is Captain Nuttbruster, the camp bursar. Nuttbruster? Harris."

Nuttbruster looked me over, speculative. "Is this...?"

"The cadet we've spoken of, yes."

The old wheeze continued looking me over a few more seconds, like I was a cockroach on his lunch or something. Then he shrugged, and offered me a handshake. I took it, gentle; not 'cause I was feeling anything good about the old guy, but because I was afraid I might break his arm off.

After we'd shaken hands, Von Schlager pointed us into some chairs

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and we sat down. "Well, Colonel?" Nuttbruster said. His voice was like dry cornstalks rattling in the October wind.

"I've reached a decision," the colonel said, as he paced across the room. "The answer is, yes." Nuttbruster smiled, I think. Hard to tell; his mouth turned up at the corners, but it looked like a true smile would crack his face.

The Colonel turned to me. "For fifteen years, Charlie here —," he

jerked a thumb at Nuttbruster, "—has been nagging me to buy a computer and enter, well, the twentieth century, anyway." Nuttbruster and the Colonel exchanged quick, secret smiles. "For fifteen years I've fought it. But thanks to you, Harris, he's finally worn me down."

Von Schlager walked back around behind his desk, flipped open my record folder, and pulled out a sheet of paper. Suddenly his voice was all cold hard authority. "Here's your summer project, Cadet Harris! Starting today, you report to Captain Nuttbruster! You will spend all of your available time designing, purchasing, and installing a computer network for the academy! The system will do tactical simulations, war gaming, and artillery plotting; it will enable our instructors to get their paperwork out on time—" (Aside, to Nuttbruster, "The accreditation board is bitching about that again,") "—and if at all possible, it will emulate a M-905 Field TactiComp!" The colonel turned, and shot Nuttbruster a wry little smile.

"Oh yes," he said in a fake-weary voice, "it's also got to do accounting." This time Nuttbruster smiled a real smile. I saw it. Honest.

Von Schlager handed my new orders to me. "The captain controls the purse strings, Harris. Your job is to provide the technical expertise. You tell him what you need, and he'll tell you what you can afford. Any questions?"

I thought it over. Truth to tell, the whole thing was just starting to soak in. A computer net. I'd just been given the go-ahead to architect a computer net. By Woz, I wasn't just going to be a NetMaster, I was going to be a SystemGod! Then it hit me full stream, and my face went flushed and hot. I could get any hardware I wanted—like a SatLink. I'd

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uplink to SatNet, downlink to NationNet, put through a long-distance patch to a certain CityNet... Mikey Harris was coming back on line! "No, sir," I said in a shaky voice.

"Good. Dismissed." Nuttbruster and I stood and saluted, and I hate to admit it, but I was so shaky with excitement the old wheeze beat me out the door. "Harris?" the colonel called out.

I stopped, and turned. "Yes, sir?"

He was looking down at my ankle brace. “When you get around to installation, remind me to detail a squad of summer boys to do the grunt work for you.”

“Thank you, sir.” I turned to leave again. Just as I got my hand on the doorknob, he remembered something else.

“Harris?”

“Yessir?”

He looked me in the face, full. I’d never caught before just how cold, blue, and serious his eyes were. “I want this thing up and running by fall quarter. Not ‘in debugging’ or ‘looking promising’ or ‘90 percent there,’ or any of those other euphemisms you computer people use when you mean it’s not done yet.” His eyes suddenly went deadly, and it was like looking down the bore of a double-barrelled gun, one of those big Nitro Express things they used to use before AK-47s became the weapon of choice for elephant poachers. “Finish on time, Harris, and you’ll be King of Grade Three. Screw up, and I will take a personal interest in making your life miserable. Understood?”

I understood. Oh boy, I understood.

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Chapter 17

Sometimes I think my brain is a half-debugged inference engine.

The nIs’ job was to dump in raw data by the ton, and my job was to sort through all the crud and pull out an inference. But I say the process is only half-debugged, because I kept pulling out the wrong inferences. Not the ones my Instructors expected.

Or maybe they were the right ones. Maybe all of school is just a supersubtle Turing Test: You pull out the expected inference, you’re a servicable average unit. But if you’re genuinely intelligent (not just simulating the appearance of intelligence), you pull out the secret, hidden inference, and only you and the instructor know you got the true/true answer. And sometimes not even the instructor.

For example, History. The point of a history lesson was always supposed to be razor-sharp clear. If we didn’t use the exact phrase

Feinstein was looking for in discussion, he'd beat us over the head with
The Moral Of The Story (just like back in the Peloponnesian War days)
until we got it down cold and could repeat the words he wanted to hear
like a bunch of obedient little robots.
But then, there'd be an other inference. Like this one: western
civilization is descended from the Greeks. Not just ideas; not just
political systems, or philosophy, or ethics. There is a real literal path you
can trace that leads from Greece, to Rome, to the Holy Roman Empire,
to Constantinople. Then, as the Moslem world expands, the refugess
from Byzantium move north, and east, and around the Black Sea, and up
the Dnepr valley. And the Greek Orthodox church evolves into Russian
Orthodox. And the title Caesar gets corrupted to Czar...
Meantime, your ancient, dusty, oh-so-remote Persia of Darius and

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Xerxes and Marathon begets the Sassanid Empire, which begets the
Safavid, which begets the Pahlavi, who get swept away in the opening
blasts of the First Jihad...
Until one day you sit up sudden, buzzing with the realization that
when an airliner gets blown up over Scotland, it's just the latest round in
the war between Greece and Persia. Three thousand years, and it's still
going on. Flags, and kings, and faces of the dead have all changed a
thousand thousand times, but that war, it seems, will go on forever.
Chilling thought, innit?
Okay, here's another left-handed inference. After six semesters of
looking at cultures and nations from all over time, my personal brain
kicked out this one utter core truth: Every successful human society has
a clear-defined adulthood ritual.
Oh, the age of the participant, the rites/ordeals undergone, and the
priveleges bestowed; these are all situational variables keyed off the
society structure. It could be simple as switching from shorts to long
pants or tough as adult circumcision (ouch!), but every human tribe
since the first ape chipped a flint has had some way for its youngers to
say, "Today, I am a man." And forever after that, it wasn't how old you

were that mattered, it was what you did.

Blur the line between child and adult—let your children take risks like adults, let your adults be irresponsible like children—and you get major-league trouble.

That's why the Colonel went all the way back to the Bronze Age for his adulthood ritual, I guess. He wanted to make sure we knew it wasn't a game anymore. You went through the ritual, forever after you played for keeps.

So this is how I became a man.

By the start of August I had the NetSpines strung, the virtual NetServer (actually, five computers) running, and about half the applications implemented. I was real proud of my NetSpine design; it was one of the few victories I'd won over Nuttbruster. Like most olders, he was fixated on the central nervous system paradigm, with everything

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feeding into one monolithic core processor. My net was radially symmetrical, like a starfish. (Left-handed inference, again! God, I wished I'd studied anatomy back when I was a cyberpunk!) The processing power was distributed out in the arms, meaning there was no one piece that everything else depended on. Hack a starfish apart, and each arm remains viable. Short of a camp-wide powerout, my net couldn't crash! Nuttbruster really liked the sound of that.

'Course, it helped even more when he found out my design was cheaper, too.

So by the beginning of August I was feeling real good about the way the net was going together. Then one day I got the quiet word that I was expected to start attending the weekly Council Fires, and I just about dropped a bit.

Okay, I know it sounds silly. Stupid, even; overgrown boyscout stuff. But you put twenty-plus men around a camp fire, start the wind rustling the aspens, cue the coyotes howling off in the distance—

And bring on the stars. Oh God, the stars! Turning in a big wheel around Polaris: Deneb straight overhead, shining like a beacon, Altair

rising low and bright above the trees, Vega completing the third node of the Summer Triangle—

It's magic. Powerful magic. Around the Council Fire, men spoke in low voices, not because they wanted to, but because the forest demanded it. In the dark and shadows, everyone was equal. (Oh sure, rank still mattered, but it was rank among equals. True rank flows from the authority of the officer and the respect of the subords.) Someone—anyone—would start to speak, and everyone would turn to listen, their faces etched black in the flickery orange light.

The fire was our link. Everyone took a hand in feeding it, throwing on a few twigs or a pine cone, not by orders but by silent, mutual consent. The pine burned sweet, and crackled soft. Oak made slow, red coals; birch burned down to hard white brilliance. Somewhere in the back of my mind I always half expected to see a shaman come dancing out in his mask and rattles, and somewhere behind me, just beyond the

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circle of light, I always felt the presence of the bear, the Great Bear that's been the enemy of my tribe ever since men first stood up on their hind legs.

Like I said, Council Fire was real roots magic. It was also the Academy's adulthood ritual.

I hosed it the first few times, of course. Made the mistake of thinking that freedom to talk was the same as freedom to bitch —and boy, did I have a lot to bitch about! Nuttbruster killed my SatLink plans, and fought every damned acquisition like the money was coming right out of his veins!

Then I made the mistake of thinking that polite silence checked out the same as appreciation of my brilliance, and spent twice as much time as I should have arguing against Nuttbruster's decision to buy metal EtherNet cabling (he got a great deal on it surplus somewhere) instead of laser fiberoptics. Only later did I flag that I was trying to beat one of the old Space War hardcodes: Don't waste energy reinforcing a lost position. Which, in a weird way, ties into my worst mistake of all.

I giggled when we all took turns pissing on the fire.

I still don’t understand this one. I may never understand why Real Men always piss on campfires, when it’s time to put them out and turn in. But I did learn real quick that it’s solemn biz, and giggling is maximum bad form.

By the middle of August I’d made all the mistakes I was going to make, and I’d got a firm lock on the protocol. On the Sunday after my seventeenth birthday—pure coincidence, that— I finally took the big walk through the invisible door and left my childhood behind.

We didn’t use words like that, of course. In the Von Schlager scheme of things, you didn’t ever say things like that out loud. By the time you were entitled to declare your adulthood, it was perfect obvious. Or else you were boasting, and that was also bad form.

So I never said, “Today, I am a man.” Instead, the Colonel waited until most of the week’s business was out of the way, then threw a handful of pine cones into the fire, stared deep into the hissing red

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flames, and started to speak.

“As you know,” he said, in his deep, growly voice, “we’ve been wiring the Academy for computers this summer. I’m told that the system is now complete.” Von Schlager turned to me, his eyes two mysterious, dark pits in the flickering orange firelight. “One man is responsible for the system design. Cadet Harris, will you tell us how we can use the network?”

I choked, sputtered, babbled a few nonsense things. He’d caught me flatfooted and unprepped.

“Stand, Harris,” the Colonel ordered.

I stood, nervous, and all those faces turned to me. The near ones were half-hid in shadow; the far ones blurred into shimmering orange masks across the fire. And then it clicked.

To me. They were all looking to me. And they didn’t care how sharp I was, or how much late-night time I’d put into debugging the realtime interface. They didn’t want to hear me bitch about how Nuttbruster argued over every damn nickel and dime, or know how

pissed I was that he'd bought slow and archaic IBM digital hardware for most everything. (Wheezy old bean counters have their own #1 Rule, I guess, which goes: Nobody's ever been fired for buying IBM.

Nuttbruster was still holding a grudge against the Nipponese for the Technology Embargo, like stuff that happened forty years ago still mattered.)

They didn't want to hear about how it took me three weeks to flag that feeding praise and suggestions to my summer boy cable stringers worked better than screaming at them when they hosed up (besides, screaming at them was Payne's job), and they didn't need to know how disappointed I was that we couldn't afford the neural network coprocessor.

I mean, I knew that no neurals—and no high-speed parallel analog data bus—meant no image recognition processing, and therefore no true A.I.

But all of sudden that didn't matter anymore. It was my problem, not theirs. That's the way it worked at the Council Fire. You didn't boast;

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you didn't make excuses. If it was a bug someone could help you nail, you brought it up. Otherwise, if it was finished, you kept your problems in your personal file and talked about what you'd done. Not what you could have done, or wanted to do. Ex post facto what-ifs were no better than wishes, and if wishes were horses beggars could ride.

(Corollary: If turnips were watches I'd wear one by my side, whatever that means.)

I looked around that circle of solemn, fire-lit faces, and flagged they wanted to know one thing, and one thing only: what my net could do for them.

They wanted to know what I'd done for the tribe.

It was hard at first, but I told them. I talked about what the net could do for the Academy, and they listened. To me. To little Mikey Harris. Their teacher. For the first time in my life I wasn't some kid trying to deal with a crowd of ignorant, condescending olders.

I was an equal.

#

“Mail call!” The Grade One gopher stuck his face into my

improvised office. “Letter for you, sir!”

I didn’t look up from my terminal; I was deep in the heart of the

academic system, tracking down a truly nasty bug. A few weeks before

some idiot kid had buried a line in every program that said if

student_id$=“Michael Harris” then grade_val$=“A”, and he couldn’t

remember all the places where he’d hidden it.

The gopher was still standing there, waiting for me to take the

envelope.

“Is it important?” I asked, stealing a quick look up.

He stared at the envelope; I saw his lips move as he silent read

David & Martha Harris off the return address label. “It’s from your

parents,” he said, making a major intellectual leap. I started to get out of

my chair, then checked the system date on my terminal instead.

Yup. August 28. Allowing for post office lag, Dad was right on

schedule. “Put it on the table,” I said, and went back to my work.

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There was a time when I used to get buzzed about letters from home.

That was before I remembered a little program I’d helped Dad install on

his personal computer: LetterRight! Input a name and six keywords,

select a style (business/formal, business/bootlicking, personal/friend,

personal/family, or service/complaint), and it kicked out one page of

generic verbal oatmeal for you. Tie in the optional LetterBase! module,

and it kept track of the names and keywords you used.

Link it to your clock/calendar, and it kicked out letters automatic.

Interface the OCR scanner, and it read your incoming mail, copped a

few keywords, stuck them in the LetterBase! file with an xref to the

correspondent’s name, and used them to generate your next letter. All

you had to do was keep your printer in blank paper.

It was February of my second Grade One year when I flagged I was

on Dad’s mid-quarter mailing list. The business templates were at least

smart enough not to use Sunday dates, but the personal mid-quarter

option always used the 15th. Six sequential letters from Dad, dated 11/15, 2/15, 5/15, 8/15, 11/15, and 2/15 again, and I started to get suspicious. Going back over the letters, I applied the Turing Test...

Which wasn't a fair trial, was it? After all, that only proved the letters weren't written by an intelligent being. It didn't rule out their being written by Dad. So I suckertrapped my next two letters; simply loaded them with bizarro keywords. When Dad's May 15 letter started with, "Sorry to hear about your hysterectomy," I knew I had him nailed.

I shot a glance at the letter the gopher had left on the table. It could wait. I had lots of work to do.

All the same, sometimes the recombined keywords made funny reading. I flip/flopped a few times, finished disarming the program currently in memory, then saved it and decided to take a break. Walking over to the table, I picked up the envelope, did a double-take on the address, and tore it open frantic.

The letter was in Mom's big, sloppy handwriting. It said:

#

"Dear Mikey,

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"This is hard to say, so I'll just get it over with. Your father probably never told you, but we've been on the brink of divorce ever since you left.

"Why? Because your father lied to me. He convinced me that we were just sending you away for the summer, and by the time I came to believe that he really would enroll you full time—

"A bad marriage is hard to explain, Mikey. You put on blinders. There's so much you pretend not to see. It's like clinging to floating wreckage: you can see the shore, but you just can't bring yourself to let go and swim for it. After all, you are still afloat, and with luck you might drift that way.

"I pretended not to see that your father was just too busy to bother with you. I pretended not to see what was going on between him and Faun—and Barbi before her, and Cyndi after, and then there was Buffy, and Loni, and Sandi, and I don't believe that even he can remember all

their names.

“I tried to ignore all that; after all, I had a marriage to save. I had a son. And then, when you got to be a nuisance, I was even willing to sacrifice you to save my marriage.

“You don’t appreciate the power of a bad relationship, Mikey. It’s like the worst drug of all. There’s no high; all you hope for is that you can stay numb. And I was hooked.

“Until last month, when your stepsister Krystle had her baby. (Did your father tell you she was pregnant? Did he even tell you she was married?) That makes you an uncle, Mikey; unfortunately, it also made David a grandfather. When he realized that—

“He bought a red motorcycle, got a hair transplant, and filed for divorce. He gets the condo; I’d forgotten about that damned prenuptial contract. My replacement’s already moved in, and she’s due to graduate from high school any day now.

“I’m sorry, Mikey. I’d fight for your custody and try to bring you home, but your father gets free legal services as part of his benefits and I can’t find a lawyer willing to take on Fuji-DynaRand. Don’t bother

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writing back. I still don’t have a permanent address.

“I’ll be in touch.

“Love always, Mom.”

#

I was still sitting there, holding the letter and staring blank into space, when the Colonel stuck his head through the doorway. “Say, Harris, I was just thinking—,” he stopped, and looked hard at me.

“Harris?” he asked after a few seconds. Slow, I turned to look at him. Slow, and dull, and numb.

“Yeah?” I said. Not even, “Yeah, sir?” Which proves how numb I was. Like, I’d just invited him to bite my head off. There was a pause—a long, empty pause, while my brain said I should go for damage control and my gut said why bother?

The colonel pointed to the letter, and said, soft, “Bad news from

home?”

I nodded.

He stepped into the room, shut the door, and pulled up a chair.

“Want to talk about it, son?”

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Chapter 18

“Fall in!” Payne brayed. “Form up!” He looked around the airstrip and spotted some poor wide-eyed kid hiding in the weeds. “Are you waiting for an invitation, pissant?” The kid, definitely a top contender for the title of Ugliest Haircut in the Entire Free World, got up slow out of the poison ivy and joined the thirty other cadet recruits standing in front of the briefing shed.

I slugged down the last of my coffee and started collecting the props for my magic show.

Payne was still shouting at the kids when I stepped out of the shack. “Dress that line!” he bellowed. “You call that a line, pissants?” I stopped, looked them over, and had to admit he was right; it was about the poorest excuse for a line I’d seen all summer. But Payne was good at his job, and he had two full weeks yet to get them ready for fall quarter. I had maximum confidence he’d pull it off.

Payne made eye contact with me. I shot him a little nod.

“Ten-shun!” he screamed, and the poor kids jumped half out of their skins.

“Thank you, sergeant,” I said quietly. He stepped back deferential, and I walked up smiling. A few of the cadet recruits tentative smiled back.

Pissants obviously didn’t recognize the good cop/bad cop routine when they saw it. This was going to be fun.

“Hi,” I said to the new boys, and smiled again. A few more of them started to thaw. “I’m Cadet Captain Harris, and I’m here to give you a little introductory lesson in electronic counter measures.” While they were still wondering what that meant, I switched on the wand and started walking down the line.

It chirped on the first one. I checked the EM signature display, then

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announced, “Matsushita digital watch.” Kid couldn’t have looked more surprised if I’d pulled his brain out through his nose.

The second recruit’s person was clean, but something in his suitcase tripped the wand. “Vidslate,” I announced. Then I looked at the secondary trace. “And a couple comicbook ROMs.” He was still looking embarassed when I moved onto the third one. The third recruit was regular gold mine; digital watch on his wrist, calculator in his left breast pocket, and a personal music player stashed in his suitcase. “I hope you brought plenty of CDs,” I advised him, half-kidding, full earnest.

Around the tenth time the wand chirped, some kid with frizzy red hair and Dumbo ears asked the question I’d been waiting for all along. “Suh? What all is that thang, ennaway?” I stepped back, and smiled. I love cadet recruits. They’re so predictable.

“This,” I said, looking casual at the wand, “is a little gadget we built around the sensing module of an M-387 Personal Anti-Radiation Missile.” I made an elaborate pass over Frizzy with the wand, spotted the Panasonic chessputer in his right jacket pocket. “Mind if I borrow your chess game for a minute?” Too surprised to think, he handed it over.

Switching the chessputer into demo mode (I wanted to make sure it was the noisiest circuit for miles around), I gave it to one of the other recruits and pointed at a stand of scrub oak on the other side of the airstrip. “Run over there and stick this in the crotch of one of those trees,” I said. “Then hurry back here.” The kid instant took off, and inward, I marveled. Command presence really does work!

When the runner was safely back on this side of the airstrip, I stepped into the briefing shed and picked up my second prop. “This is an M-387 PARM launcher,” I said as I came walking out into the sunshine again. They gasped, excited. If you’re pathologically into guns—like most Von Schlager voluntaries are—then I guess something that looks vaguely like an Uzi with a 25mm bore must be pretty impressive. “The

M-387 PARM!" I began, in a parade-field bellow Payne would have

been proud to use, "is a 500-gram rocket-propelled munition designed to

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home in on stray electromagnetic radiation!" I flashed the weapon

around so they could all ooh and aah at the black, efficient ugliness of it.

"Effective to one-point-five kilometers!" I continued, "the projectile is

sensitive to radio frequency leakage from virtually all consumer digital

products, including watches, calculators, ROM read—Ooops!"

WHOOSH! The little rocket streaked across the airstrip and took a

sharp dive into the scrub oak. BLAM! Scratch one chessputer—and the

tree it was sitting in.

Slow, I picked myself up, dusted off my pants, and took a discrete

scan of the new boys. Bad sign: Only three of them had had the presence

of mind to hit the dirt when the weapon "misfired." Payne had more

work ahead of him than I thought.

"The ChiComms have a similar munition," I continued as if nothing

had happened, "as well as an air-dropped version that can go into

dormant/mine mode. There are a lot of one-armed Burmese who used to

wear digital watches." Some of the boys, I flagged, were now staring at

me with genuine fear on their faces, then looking to Payne as if hoping

he'd save them.

Good. They were supposed to react like that.

"When you reach the campus, you will be asked to turn in your

personal electronics," I concluded. "I suggest you do so." Turning, I

nodded crisp to Payne.

"Left face!" he bellowed. "Double-time, forward!" The cadet

recruits started off up the jeep trail to the academy. Payne stuck with

them a mo, then dropped back.

"Was the stumble convincing?" I asked, quiet.

"Getting better," he whispered back. "In fact, not bad for a Grade

Four whose braids are still shiny."

"Thank you, sir." He cut me a quick wink, then jogged off to catch

up with his boys. I went back into the briefing shed and started cleaning

the M-387 launcher.

It’s simple: applied Machiavelli, really. In political science we’d spent half of Spring quarter discussing The Prince and the whole issue

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of whether it was better for a leader to be loved or feared. We concluded old Niccolò got it right when he said they weren’t mutual exclusive polarities; in fact, a leaders’ best option is to be both.

A pity Machiavelli never had matrix algebra. I of course immediate concepted a multi-dimensional array with love/hate on one major axis, fear/contempt on another, respect/disrespect on a third, and the whole thing solving to a variable on an obedience/insolence continuum. The concept was so perfect in my head I just couldn’t wait to get out of the classroom and start coding the algorithm!

But once again, I started with coding and ended up cussing Nuttbruster six ways from Sunday. He’d never let me buy the neural coprocessor I kept asking for, and this was exactly the sort of job that neurals did best.

Still, even with the clumsy Imperfect But Marketable digital hardware I was able to crunch enough numbers over the summer to prove the Academy was making a serious mistake with cadet recruits. When I’d first arrived, the combination of Payne and Roid Rogers put me somewhere way out in the fear/hate parts of the matrix. But all the Academy had to do was make a small change in the reception routine—get rid of those smiling sadists with the airport detex—and most boys did a 180o flip on the hate axis. They were happy to surrender their contraband. The DIs and I had tested it three times now on the arriving fall class, and it worked perfect!

‘Course, I also had an ulterior motivational. It’d taken me the better part of a year to debug the Academy’s computer system, and I hadn’t had time to trojan it yet. So I’d be damned if I was gonna let some smartass kid smuggle in a pocket computer and slip a virus into my network.

I was just closing the lock on the M-387’s case when I heard cadet boots come pounding down the path from the academy. A message from

the Colonel, no doubt; by now most every other staffer was adjusted to the network messaging system, but a certain stubborn old bird still stuck to paper speedmemos. “It’s a lot harder to ignore a panting runner who’s

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standing there waiting for a reply,” he’d told me, one of the many times I’d tried to show him how the messaging system worked. Turning around, I started to reach for the door, then changed my mind out of fear for the safety of my fingers.

Good decision. A second later the door blew in, followed by a winded Grade One. “Cadet Captain Harris!” he gasped. “Message from Colonel Von Schlager, sir!”

“Thanks.” I returned his salute and took the piece of paper. It said about what I expected; the Colonel wanted to see me in his office pronto. Reaching for the M-387 case, I sudden spun out another idea and turned around. “Cadet, what’s your name?”

“Duvalier, sir!”

I laid a hand on the case and patted it gentle. “Duvalier, can I trust you to make sure the M-387 goes straight back to the armory?”

“Sir! Yes, sir!” The kid’s eyes just lit right up, like I’d asked him to squire the President or something, and he picked up the weapon. Staggering a little under the load—damned thing must have weighed near half as much as he did—he bobbed his head in a sort of a salute, said, “Thank you, sir,” and caromed out the door.

I shook my head at the weirdness of it. If I’d ordered him to take the weapon back, he would’ve acted like a bleeding martyr with an attitude problem. But since I made the job sound like a privilege, he couldn’t wait to do it. Big time weirdness, I decided: The Academy was teaching me how to push all the good jarhead motivational buttons, but I still wasn’t any closer to understanding them.

With a shrug, I xoffed that line of thought and started up the trail towards the Academy.

#

Immediate summons to the Colonel’s office were by now common

enough that I was sort of getting used to them, but Chomsky's passing me straight into the sanctum sanctorum—still a mighty rare procedural, as far as I was concerned—made me just a little uneasy. Then, when the Colonel looked up from some paperwork and shot me a tight, frustrated

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expression I'd never seen before, I started to feel true worry. We got through all the usual reporting and saluting crap, and he pointed to a chair. "Sit down, Harris." I did—but not before I flagged he had my personal file sitting right in front of him. My stomach did a nervous flip.

The Colonel looked at the top sheet again, then snorted, and looked at me. "Harris, were you aware that you turn 18 next Monday?"

The instincts were still there; I fought the urge to reply smartass. Not bloody likely I'd forget my birthday, was it? "Yes, sir."

He pushed a semi-folded sheet of paper across the desk at me. "This letter came in on the morning plane." I flattened the paper and scanned it.

Fuji-DynaRand stationery. I'd recognize it anywhere. I jumped down to the bottom of the page, checked the signature. Not from Dad. It was signed by some lawyer in the F-D Legal Affairs department, Employee Benefits section ...

I returned to the top of the letter and read it through slow. Twice.

When I looked up again, the Colonel asked, "Do you understand what this means, Harris?"

"Dad's not going to pay my Fall quarter tuition, sir. He's cut me off without a cent." I scanned the letter one more time. Funny. I thought I should feel angry or something, but I wasn't even surprised.

"It also means that come Monday, you're free to leave."

My head started to spin a little. Free. After ten thousand years in the bottle I was free.

"The airbus will take you to Seattle," he was going on. "You should be able to hitch a Learjet ride from there, but after that, you're on your own." He looked at me sharp; I was still phasing in and out on the concept of free. "How does this make you feel, Harris?"

I looked at him. Truth to tell, this situational had occurred to me a couple times in the last few weeks, and I'd already done a good deal of preprocessing. So how did I feel? The real truth? Maximum honest?

"Disappointed, sir." I said at last. "I wanted to complete the academic program."

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He leaned back in his chair, did a brief impression of Rodin's Thinker, and looked me over, appraising. "Are you certain of that?"

No hesitation. "Yes, sir."

He looked at me a while longer, then said, "I was hoping you'd say that." Leaning forward, he picked up another sheet of paper. "I've already discussed your situation with Captain Nuttbruster. It seems accountants can never simply give things away, but I do control a small discretionary fund which should cover your tuition, and he's willing to write off your room and board as the computer administrator's stipend. Does this sound acceptable to you?"

It didn't take a second's thought. "Yes, sir."

"Good. Report to the bursar's office at 0800 Monday morning. He'll have the papers ready for you to sign. Dismissed." Slow, I stood up and started for the door. It was tough to figure out how I felt; I mean, one little partition of my thinkspace thought I should be mad at getting cut off so cold. Another whiney little voice way in the back kept screaming I was an idiot, for passing up this silver-plate opportunity to get out of the Academy.

But mostly what I felt was warm; an at-home kind of warm. For once I'd made a decision that felt right to at least 80% of my brain, and it was a truly good feeling.

Hand on the doorknob, I hesitated. "Harris?" he called out. Dammit, I knew he was gonna do that!

Turning around, I said, "Yes, sir?"

He was shuffling through my personal file again. "I've been looking over your Fall class schedule, and I've reached a decision. Drop Pacific Rim history; I want you in my Advanced Theory class."

"Sir, that's a Grade Five course."

“And most Grade Fives are seventeen going on eighteen, like you.

Don’t argue with me, Harris. You’re in my class.”

“Thank you, sir.” I think. He dismissed me again, and this time I

made it out the door before he had any more afterthoughts.

Bright and early Monday morning, I went down to the bursar’s

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office and got everything squared away. I must have signed a hundred

papers; every time I thought I was done, Nuttbruster’d trot out another

load of multipart forms and resume the Holy Chant of the High Church

of Paperpushing: “Sign here ... and here ... and here ... “

I finished up just about the time the supply plane arrived, and after

lunch the mail clerk popped by my office and dropped off a letter from

Dad. Eager, I tore it open. Could it be—? YES!

The letter began, “Dear Michael: Congratulations on your promotion

to Grand Imperial Eunuch, First Class. As you know, I had a similar

experience once ... “

For a few minutes, there, I had this vision. It’s a thousand, five

thousand, maybe ten thousand years in the future. I’m gone, Dad’s gone,

everybody who ever knew any of us is dead and gone, but somewhere

deep in the ruins of the Fuji-DynaRand corporate headquarters there’s

still this stupid little program kicking out incoherent pseudopersonal

letters every three months, regular as a cesium clock. Only the olders

finally got the hang of email, so the letters get zapped by SatLink to the

former site of the Von Schlager Military Academy, where somewhere

deep in the bowels of what was once the Michael A. Harris Memorial

Computer Science Building a primitive tribe gathers four times a year

around an ancient Apple][+, to wait for the words of their oracle to

show up in smudgy green phosphor. Arguments start, then fights; whole

wars have been fought over the interpretation of The Message.

I fell off my chair and bruised a rib, I was laughing so hard.

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Chapter 19

The Colonel died the summer I turned 19. His death is a big black hole in my memory; I mean, a literal astronomical black hole. The last place in the universe I ever want to go again, but its gravity keeps sucking me back.

I've rerun it in my mind a thousand times, trying to figure out what I could have done different. Volunteered for proctor? But I did my magic show for the summer boys, and took my maximum best shot at flagging the trouble cases. For chrissakes, the kid wasn't even an Involuntary! Just another quiet little boy with dark hair and a dark attitude: A loser in the games, a last-finisher on the obstacle course, a wallflower in discussion. Until the day some stupid bunkhouse prank blew his final fuse, and he smashed the lock on the door of the firing range locker. Then he was primal insanity with a three-foot steel penis.

I was off on a long explore with the other Grade Fives that day; we didn't find out what'd happened until after we got back. They say the Colonel had almost talked the kid into putting the rifle down when a couple gung-ho Grade Twos came charging in like tag-team Rambo. The kid fired one wild shot.

The bullet went in through the Colonel's left eye and came out just above and behind his right ear.

No farewells, no goodbyes, no famous last words. The body kept breathing for a few more hours, long enough for them to MedEvac him to Calgary, but everything that was Colonel Ernst Von Schlager, Real Army Retired and Our Founder, died the moment that kid pulled the trigger. I understand Payne broke four noses and a jaw—none of them his own—keeping the kid alive 'til the Mounties showed up.

The next couple days were fractaled, chaotic. The camp boiled with

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rumors about the Board, controlling votes, and the Colonel's will. At the end of the week, Nuttbruster and two other admins flew down to the States for an emergency meeting with Von Schlager's ex-wife.

Nuttbruster never came back. Instead, the next Monday a red and white private Lear made one low buzz over the academy, then swooped

down to the airstrip. Five minutes later, one of the helos came whopwhop-whopping up from the airstrip to land square in the middle of the quad.

The new commandant, Gary Von Schlager, had arrived.

#

After that, things happened real fast. DeWitt, the purchasing agent, and Pavelcek, the registrar, got fired that very morning. The chief cook and the nutritionist were next, and Chomsky quit in disgust on Thursday. Each time the Lear flew some of the staffers out, it came back with their replacements, and Gary greeted every one of the new guys like a longlost brother. Gary's buddies, I flagged, were partial to wraparound sunglasses, slicked hair, and expensive shoes.

Except the new guy who just sort of appeared one day, and took Chomsky's place. He looked like a damn walking ad for paramilitary supplies: camo boots, camo clothes, camo beret, camo sunglasses. I saw him putting balm on his sunburnt lips, his second day up, and damned if it wasn't camo chapstik! He packed jungle knives in his boots, throwing knives up his cuffs, a row of green anodized shuriken on his belt, and an official Rambo-signature machete in a breakaway scabbard on his thigh.

Then an old, old memory swam up, and I had to run and hide to keep from laughing in his face. He looked like one of those silly Lance Stallone clones I met on my original flight up!

Not only that, he clanked when he walked.

#

I don't recall that anyone actually called a Council Fire. I was just out for a quiet dusk stroll, trying to evaluate the new situationals, when I spotted a little orange flicker through the trees and bent my path over that way.

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Payne was sitting by himself on the edge of the council ring, tending a tiny fire of twigs and pine cones. I found a dead branch, broke it into a couple short pieces, and walked in. "Mind if I join you?"

No words. He just gestured, like to say it was a free country. I

dragged up a section of stump and sat down, about six feet away.

Feinstein, captain of the history department, joined us about five minutes later; Baker and Schmidt from the science department about ten minutes after that. By the time it was proper dark, most of the surviving staffers had wandered into the circle, and we'd moved the fire over to the pit and built it up.

"Funny," Feinstein said to nobody in particular, when Minelli from Social Studies came wandering in carrying a short birch log. "We're like Zoroasterians, all bringing our little offerings to the fire."

"Yeah," somebody else said. A couple of us nodded. The fire danced and crackled in the still night.

After a while, Baker stirred the coals with a stick. "You get a look at that new guy, the one who replaced Chomsky. What's his name?"

"Mohler," Minelli said.

"Right," Baker said. "Mohler, Boy Gary's Number Two."

"He looks like a number two," Feinstein snorted.

Baker chuckled. "Ain't it the truth. Fruitcake paramil to the nth degree. Did you see he put camo toilet paper in the admin latrine?"

We all got a quick laugh out of that one, except Payne. "Mohler?" he asked. "Daniel P. Mohler?"

Minelli turned, his face an orange and black mask in the night. "The name mean something to you?"

Payne threw a pine cone in the fire. "Could be. Remember the Anglo Resistance Movement? Those clowns down in Colorado a few years back who were going to free us from NOG—the Nipponist Occupation Government?"

Feinstein muttered a few choice curses under his breath.

"Killed some people, didn't they?" Baker asked. "Robbed a few banks? I thought they were all dead or in prison."

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"Their information minister got acquitted," Payne said, soft. "He was a whacked-out paramil named Daniel P. Mohler."

We were all quiet a minute or two, until Feinstein said, "Shit. One German was bad enough. Now we've got two imitation Nazis." Feinstein

suddenly flagged Schmidt was looking at him with a glare that could've peeled paint. "Sorry," he mumbled.

"Just for the record," Schmidt said, "and speaking as a third generation German-American, these neo-Nazi shitheads make me want to puke. They're like Satanists: worshipping the hate and evil, and totally forgetting the good."

Feinstein blinked, and stared cockeyed at Schmidt. "Excuse me. Did I just hear you say there was good in Nazism?"

Schmidt paused, bit a knuckle, and chose his next words very carefully. "Well, Satanism is a perversion of Wiccan. And neo-Nazism—you know, there actually were some National Socialists who tried to do good. Germany in 1932 was a disaster. People were literally starving to death in the streets. And Stalinist Russia was an active and growing menace.

"Then this Hitler fellow came along, and he scared the sane people at first, but after awhile they started to feel about him the way you Americans felt about Reagan. Sure, the guy was clearly a kook, and all that ranting and raving about der Juden was pretty distasteful. But what the Hell; he was standing up to the Russians, and what he was doing for the economy did seem to be working."

Feinstein poked the fire with a long stick. "And then the Holocaust."

Schmidt looked glum. "My ancestors died, too. In Dresden. And Kessel. In the frozen mud of the Eastern Front. They were on a runaway train; they didn't know how to stop it."

"I know the feeling," Baker added.

Feinstein seemed to accept that.

After a bit, Payne spoke up. "I've got more bad news for you. You know that new purchasing agent, Shaday? I've been in touch with some of my old buddies. Seems Shaday sits on the board of three companies,

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all of which are currently being investigated for military procurement fraud." Payne cracked a little giggle, and my blood ran cold. In five years at the Academy I'd only heard Payne laugh three times, and his

laugh sounded barely human. Maybe 'cause of what he found laughable.

"It's a pun, you see? Shaday? Shoddy?" Payne let his high, fingernails-on-blackboard giggle loose again.

"Fitting," said Feinstein, with a nod, "and probably a hint of what we can expect." He looked around the circle, and flagged our blank expressions. "Shoddy was originally a name for a type of recycled wool," he said, switching into professor mode. "It was given its current connotation during the First Civil War, by an unscrupulous contractor who supplied uniforms for the Union army."

We all watched the fire a while longer. Flames stirred and crackled; a major log burnt through and coals subsided, sparks rising like fireflies. I copped a furtive glance around the circle. They were all staring hard into the fire, wrapped up in private thoughts.

Maybe that's the true secret of the Council Fire. It's an invitation to think, to ponder, with no hurry. No urgency to get things done. Just watch the dancing flames, and let them draw the thoughts out of you.

"Gary tried to give me a pep talk today," Schmidt said at last. "Talked for half an hour about how proud he was of what the old man had built."

"That's a surprise," Minelli said.

"Then," Schmidt went on, "he started talking about what he wanted to change. Said we'd built a great program here, but we needed to improve our marketing." Schmidt switched his voice into a nasal twang I recognized as being a bad parody of Gary Von Schlager. "Gary said, `I hope I'm not stepping on anyone's sacred cows, but let me give you the big picture in two words: Niche marketing.'

"`Now, now this academic program you got going here, that's nice, that's very nice, I like that.'" Schmidt reared back, and raised a finger in the air. He was beginning to imitate Gary's gestures, too. "`But I put it to you, who's got the money? Adults. That's where your real income

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opportunity is: Short-term paramilitary seminars for adults.'" Schmidt shook his head, and lapsed back into his normal voice. "Then Gary

showed me a magazine article about the White Patriot's Army of Kentucky and said that's who we should be pitching our program to."

"Gah!" Feinstein cleared his throat, and spat.

Payne stirred the coals with a long stick. "How'd you react?"

Schmidt looked glum. "Let's just say I was less than thrilled. So you know what Gary said? He said, `Fine, well, that's just an idea, okay? Just thought I'd get your reaction. And here's another one: You know, you can actually improve profit potential by raising prices? Because, y'see, perceived value is a function of limited availability.

"`So what I'm driving at is, I'd like to get your reaction to this new concept I've got, sort of run it up the flagpole. How do you think the staff would react if we changed admission standards? I mean right now it's kind of a freak of demographics that you've got an all-white campus. But I figure we can get another thousand dollars per student/quarter if we can guarantee parents their precious little boys won't go to school with kikes or darkies.'" Schmidt's face looked like he'd just got a strong whiff of old latrine.

Feinstein sank his head into his hands. "That does it," he blurted out. "I quit. Gary's even more of a fascist than his old man was."

Payne's voice went low and gutteral. "Don't you ever call the Colonel a fascist again. His parents carried him across the San Francisco Wall when he was two years old." (Baker flagged my blank look. "New Osaka," he whispered.) "You'll never meet a man who loved freedom more; if he could rise from the dead to stop this, he would." Payne glared at Feinstein, hard. His eyes were like cold, steel buttons.

Feinstein shot a furtive glance at Payne, then threw a stick on the fire. "All the same, I'm quitting. Anyone else?"

Schmidt looked twisted. "Me. Don't think I like the new smell around here."

"I'll make it three," Minelli added.

We all turned to look at Payne. This was it; I'd seen the vid a zillion

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times. This was the scene where Payne was going to stand up and make

us all feel like gutless cowards. This was the time for him to give us the Big Speech, about how we had to do it for the Colonel, and the Gipper, and Truth Justice and the Soviet American Way.

What he did was pause in the act of throwing a pine cone on the fire, look at his feet, and say, "I think you've got Gary wrong. He's not an idealogue; he's worse. He's an opportunist trying to exploit idealogues."

For a mo, Payne stared at the pine cone he held in his hand. Then he dropped it into the dirt.

My blood stopped flowing. He'd stopped feeding the fire. Payne looked up, at me; our eyes interlocked, and my brain felt a wash of black. I'd never seen anyone look so defeated.

He broke off the contact—I couldn't have—and looked back into the fire. "But aside from that, yeah, I guess you're right. There's no point in trying to fight them. The colonel's ex controls 70 percent of the voting stock, and what Gary wants, Gary gets. It's over." He shuffled his feet in the dust a little, then looked up. "Only, let's stick it out a year, okay? Long enough to get our good students placed at other schools." He looked at me, sideways. "We owe the cadets that much, don't we?"

In a vague, grumbly way, everyone there sort of agreed. I got up, and wandered away from the fire.

So much for heroes.

#

About two weeks before the start of Fall quarter, Gary called me into his office. He was on the phone with his back to me when I walked in, so I took a few minutes to scope the place out.

Not much had changed. The furniture was still spartan; the carpet still a bit rattish. The only changes I noticed right off were no photocube, no display of medals on the wall, and a whole pile of printout and account books stacked on the desk, right next to an overflowing ashtray. I frowned. The Colonel would never have let the place get that messy. Gary finished his phone call, hung up, and turned around.

My first reaction was to laugh. He must have shopped at the same

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place that Mohler clown did, 'cause he was wearing some kind of formal

dress uniform straight out of a bad comic opera, with frilled epaulets and gold piping and braid all over everywhere.

My second reaction was to puke. Now I knew where all the Colonel's medals had gone; Gary was wearing them. Badly. The campaign ribbons, the silver star, the Distinguished Service Cross all hung like cheap costume jewelry in strange places on the jacket.

Even the Purple Heart. For just a mo, I flashed on helping Gary earn that Purple Heart ...

He misinterpreted my smile. "Hi!" he said, bright, and stuck out his hand. I took it, shook it, and returned it to him. "So you're Mike Harris. I understand I have you to thank for this really terrific computer network here."

I nodded, deferential. "Yes, sir."

Shaking his head, he laughed and sat down on the corner of the desk. "No no, don't bother with that military crap. You call me Gary, okay?"

I nodded, smiled, kept my mouth shut. He leaned back to shuffle some folders around his desk, and came up with my personal record.

"Now Mike—can I call you Mike?—it seems my old man thought very highly of you." He flipped open the folder and pretended to read something. Looking up, he said, "I just want you to know that I have the fullest confidence in you, too."

Right, I wanted to say. That's my record you're reading?

He flipped the folder shut and tossed it back on the desk. "And that's why I'm so pleased to be the guy who brings you this good news. Mike, my old man thought so highly of you that he left a special bequest in his will. Your tuition is paid up for the full year already. Isn't that great?"

He smiled at me, broad. I nodded.

"But you're more than a student," he went on. "I like to think that you've made a special contribution to this Academy. This computer network you've built, I'm really impressed with it, did I say that? And I hope that in the months to come, you can teach me all about it."

"I'll try, sir."

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He shook his head and laughed again. "No, really, forget the military jive! I know I've got the uniform—," he fondled the DSC, and laughed at himself, "—stage dressings, to impress the yokels, y'know? But I don't want you to think of me as your commanding officer. Think of me as your friend, okay?"

And this is the part where he puts his arm around my shoulders, right?

He did. "Sure, Gary," I said. He didn't know me well enough to flag the sarcasm.

"That's better. Cigarette?" He fished a silver case out of his jacket pocket and offered one. I declined.

"Hey, that's cool. I can relate." He lit himself a cigarette, and stepped back over to the desk. "So, tell you what," he said, "now that we're friends, maybe you can answer one question for me. Correct me if I'm right, but I've been looking through all this shit," he lifted the system design manual and shook it at me, "and I still can't figure out how our system connects to the outside world."

All my nerves went on maximum alert, and a million little warning flags went up. Sure, I had spent two years begging Nuttbruster for a SatLink, but all the cues I was getting from Gary made me real suspicious. I just didn't trust the man, it was simple as that. So why was he so hot for my computer?

I smiled, casual. "Tell me what you want it to do, Gary. Maybe we can work it out."

He dropped the system manual on the desk. "Well, to get right to the crotch of the matter, I was really hoping we could tap the Utah Genealogical Database," he said. "Wouldn't that be neat? To build up background information about our applicants? Y'know, see if there are genetic factors that influence ... uh, influences?" He went silent, studying me, and took a deep, nervous drag on his cigarette.

Okay, Harris, a little voice in the back of my thinkspace said, this is it. How badly do you want the SatLink? Bad enough to give Gary and his little gang of fascists a way to screen applicants by race? Bad enough to

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negate everything the Colonel tried to build?

Get thee behind me! Sudden, I spun off this idea that maybe some hardcodes were wrong. Maybe the war games, maybe the tactical training—maybe even the Colonel's Advanced Theory class, with all his carefully refined Clausewitz and Mao Zedong —maybe that was all wrong.

Maybe sometimes you do reinforce lost positions.

See, there's this thing called integrity. And sometimes it can drive you to actions that, at first glance, seem like truly bad tactical. Stupid actions, pointless actions, actions that have only one redeemer: They're right. So what if Payne and the rest were ready to give up; I still felt I owed something to the Colonel.

Basic insurrection theory holds that defeat on the battlefield is just the first stage in a guerilla campaign. If I stuck around the academy another year, I could make life real miserable for Gary Von Schlager.

"Sorry," I said, and I threw him a big, fake smile. "Can't be done. All this archaic junk your dad's bean counter saddled me with, you know."

The disappointment on Gary's face was intense; half the cigarette went up in his next drag. "Oh, that's a bummer," he said. "That's bad." Then he looked at me, and smiled brightly. "But we can work on this, okay Mike? There might be another way?"

I smiled big. "Sure, Gary. We'll work on it. We got the whole school year to work on it." For just a moment I flashed on the Spartan commander at Thermopylae, committing himself to that final, really stupid tactical, all in the name of his personal integrity.

After five years, I finally understood why he'd done it.

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Chapter 20

FLASHBACK: It's a raw, rainy day, ugly even for late March. Clouds hang low and dark in the sky like ghost battleships; the cold wind knifes through every crack and chink in the walls and rattles the

panes loose in the window sashes. Come June, I intuit, a lot of Grade Twos are going to be learning the care and handling of caulk guns.

But that will be in June. For Now, for the particular timeframe that defines this image, we Advanced Theory students are sitting taut in our seats, paying sharp attention to the Colonel in hopes of keeping our minds off our cold, aching bladders, and trying to lean just a few imperceptible millimeters closer to the Franklin stove—without looking like we're trying to get closer.

After you've split a few cords of firewood, you learn that the trick is to out-stoic everybody else. Unless, of course, you want to volunteer to split the next cord.

So here we are, wrapped up in extra sweaters and bits of blanket looking just like some of Washington's soldiers recently thawed out from Valley Forge, while up at the front of the classroom the Colonel paces stiffly back and forth, hands clasped behind his back, that sharp look on his face that means he's going to toss a real poser at us just as soon as he figures out the toughest way to phrase it. Every few laps he stops, turns with a wicked smile on his face, starts to reach for the whiteboard—

Then he catches himself and goes back to pacing. The Colonel hates the whiteboard.

And this, I guess, is the essential dichotomy of the Von Schlager Military Academy. On one side of the classroom we have a cast-iron Franklin stove, design unchanged in 250 years, cooling slow because no

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one wants to be the first to admit he's cold and go fetch more wood.

On the other side we have a whiteboard, one of (shamed am I to admit this!) Nuttbruster's truly great ideas. He found six of them surplus somewhere, and the first I knew about it was when he showed up in my office one day with a hand-drawn pinout of the comm port. The concept is your basic wall-sized chalkboard, except you use a magnetic stylus instead of chalk, and once you have the thing all scribbled up you can—

ZAP! Press a button, and hand out photocopies of the board to everybody in the class!

ZAP! Press a different button, and fax a bitmap image to any other whiteboard or graphic terminal on the Academy network!

ZAP! Press a third button, and bitch a lot at Mikey Harris because he still hasn't found an Optical Character Recognition program that can decipher chickentrax instructorscript and turn it into nice, neat, ASCII text and .PGI graphics. Which, I guess, was Nuttbruster's whole argument for getting the whiteboards in the first place: Further pursuit of the mythical "paperless office." (And after that, the paperless latrine?)

Come to think of it, after six months of being bitched at, I'm not too crazy about the whiteboards, either.

The Colonel reaches the end of a lap, pivots, and comes to a stop.

"Question!" he barks out, looking up. (Question! the guy sitting next to me dutifully writes on his notepad.) "What is the legitimate mission of the military in peacetime?"

Six guys start to raise their hands, then stop and slow, awkward, try to pretend they're actually scratching their noses or something. The Colonel looks around the room, snorts in disgust, and picks a victim.

"Well, Mister Vang?"

Kao Vang blinks, clears his throat, and says hesitant,

"Preparedness?"

"By which you mean ... ?"

Vang clears his throat again, and speaks up a little louder.

"Preparing for the possibility of war?"

"And how do you do that?"

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"Uh, training. Drilling. Procuring weapons and stockpiling materiel. And, uh—"

A southern-fried jarhead named Hudson gets a cocky smile on his face and runs his hand up. The Colonel nods to him.

"Studying the opposition's resource deploymentalization!" Hudson booms out. "Evaluating possible confrontational venues, prioritizing mission objectives, and projectionizing the cost/benefit of various hostile engagement scenarios!"

I saw Hudson accidentally cut himself once. He didn't bleed. He exsanguinated.

The Colonel turns away from us, and does another lap. Pausing, he looks up again. "Let me phrase it a different way: What is peace?"

"A period of cheating between wars," Singh blurts out.

"That's the smartass answer," the Colonel says with a glare. "I want an objective definition: What is peace?" He looks at us, sharp. We all look at each other.

After a minute or so of silence, the Colonel sighs and tries again. "Okay, Singh, let's follow up your line of thought. What does Machiavelli have to say about peace?"

Singh smiles, proud, and raises his voice. "Peace is the breathingtime which gives you the leisure to contrive, and furnishes the ability to execute, military plans."

The Colonel freezes and points at Singh. "Lock in on that thought. A time to contrive plans. How do we contrive plans?"

We all look at each other a little more, then Kao Vang clears his throat and speaks up. "Well, the various divisional staffs—"

"That's tactical planning," the Colonel interrupts. "Who's responsible for strategic planning?"

"The Joint Chiefs of Staff?" Vang hazards.

"But even that takes place within a larger context. Who defines the mission statement? Who sets the ultimate goals?" We blank again.

The Colonel frowns. "Okay boys, here's an easy one. What's Clausewitz' first dictum?"

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Everybody's right hand shoots up. "War is only politics conducted by other means."

"Nice to know you're well-conditioned little idiots," he grumbles, not really to himself. Then he stops, parade rest, takes a deep breath, and looks up at us.

"Here we have the essential fallacy of Clausewitz!" he booms out. "On War was written in a culture and at a time when military and

civilian leadership were interchangeable. He could as easily have said, `Politics is only war conducted by other means,' and he would have been just as correct—for his time!

"But times change. Cultures change. Political institutions grow and evolve in an organic fashion. In a very real sense, a human society is a colony organism!" He pauses. We all blink a little and try to decide how we feel about being called a bunch of uppity sponges.

The Colonel lowers his voice and continues. "Clausewitz was correct—for the organism of which he was a part. But contemporary society is much more complex; the organism is more clearly differentiated. Try to apply Clausewitz literally today, and you can easily conclude that the sole function of the military is to serve domestic political expediency!"

Yeah, that seems to follow. The Colonel turns and paces a bit. "This single concept," he says without stopping, "is responsible for more stupid debacles than any other phenomenon in modern history. Consider: Vietnam. Lebanon. Cuba. The Proxy War. While military force without the will to use it is like tits on a boar—" He stops, turns, raises a finger in the air like he's going to indict God Himself. "Will without a clear knowledge of the value and limits of force is a recipe for disaster!"

He pauses, and looks us over, searching. I suddenly flag this is a critical point and scribble tits on a boar on my notepad.

"I suggest," the Colonel says softly, "that the biological analogue of contemporary society is the human brain." He makes a chopping gesture with his left hand, then turns it palm up as if holding something. "On

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one side, you have the military command structure." He turns his right hand up. "On the other, the civilian political system.

"Two autonomous hemispheres. A human brain, but with a divided corpus callosum." He looks at his hands, and then at us. "So, I put it to you again: What is the legitimate mission of the military in peacetime?"

He scans us over, sharp, looking for signs of intelligent life. Hudson

gets a confident look and raises his hand. The Colonel makes eye

contact. “Mister Hudson?”

“Domestic surveillance and political management, sir!”

The Colonel snorts, derisive. “You’ll be a big hit with the

Nixonistas, Hudson, but fortunately most of the U.S. is still a

democracy.” He resumes scanning us. “Anyone else have an idea?” I

must be goofing up somehow, because he locks his sights on me.

“Mister Harris?”

When in doubt, jargonize. “To maximally facilitate the

infrastructure interface,” I say as if it’s perfect obvious.

The Colonel looks at his shoes and chuckles a little. “You have a

great future ahead of you in law, Harris. I didn’t understand a thing after

`to.’” He looks up again, still chuckling, and scans us over once more.

“Consider the last hundred years,” he says at last, soft and serious.

“In every military action our nation has taken—every one—the question

of victory or defeat has been decided long before the first shot was fired.

Decided by the diplomatic objectives set by the civilian government.

Decided by the scope of action the right brain—,” he shook the

imaginary lump of political gray matter in his right hand at us, “—

allowed the left. Decided by the weapons procured, the negotiating

positions taken, the rhetoric used.

“Decided by the civilian government in light of what it thinks the

military can do!”

He looks at the floor and raises a finger to his lips as if shushing us.

“I submit to you,” he says softly, “that the legitimate role of the military

in peacetime is education. Your first duty is to ensure that your civilian

political leaders have a clear understanding of what you can and cannot

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do. They need to know what your real capabilities are.”

His voice drops to a low, ghost whisper, just barely audible above

the cruel March wind. “If to no one else, you owe it to the men you

command to ensure that their lives are not pissed away defending some

fool’s re-election speech.”

#

REALTIME LOCK-IN: The sky is clear, bright, French royal blue.

The hot June sun beats down hard, making my scalp sweat under the black beret. I cop a surreptitious look down the line and flag we all look uncomfortable as uncomfortable can be, but just about the time that the lad next to me starts to keel over—("Faint if you must," Payne once said to me, "but dammit, faint at attention!")—just about the time his eyes are rolling up, the windy old wheeze up on the reviewing stand finishes the commencement speech and backs away from the microphone.

We emit maximum applause. The wheeze beams and nods, obviously thinking we're applauding his content. Then Gary Von Schlager stands up, smiling sincere as any used-car salesman, shakes the wheeze's hand, and turns him over to a pair of weasels who guide him into a comfty chair at the back of the reviewing stand.

With the addledoid safely out of the way, Generalissimo Gary steps up to the podium and smiles at us. The sun glints impressive off his gold epaulets; the gold piping and blue satin of his pseudo-uniform reflect strange colors on his face. For a moment I look at his cheekbones, his eyes, the line of his jaw, and I think about how much he really does looks like his old man.

A little chill runs through me. I wish the old man were here now.

There's a point I want to argue with him.

Colonel?, I'd say, you told us our first duty is to make sure our civilian leaders understand our real capabilities.

But sir? What if the civilian leadership is the enemy?

From the podium, Commandant Gary looks down at the assembly, searching through the faces. He finds me, and gives me a smile and a wink. I'm amazed he still does that.

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I mean, it's not like I've been indiscrete. Those purchase requisitions that were "accidentally" routed to the wrong vendor —one who supplied real FDA-inspected beef, not the MUO (Meat of Unknown Origin) Shaday's company supplies—there's no way anyone can prove they were anything but a data hiccup. And after Gary finally bought me

the SatLink, I did sort of give him what he was asking for, after a fashion. I mean, the admissions program looks real promising, even though it wasn't actually working in time to screen the summer boys. By now I've gotten real good at kicking whatever rackmount is convenient and saying, "Dammit, Gary, it's all this antique junk we're using. If you'd let me buy some modern hardware..." I've got great deniability. Still, you'd think that sooner or later the guy'd put two and two together and come up with something approximating four, wouldn't you?

Maybe not. Maybe I've slipped below his threat assessment threshold. We make eye contact; Gary smiles down at me, and I return a small, dignified nod. Then he looks out at the assembly, smiles fierce and proud, and yelps, "Ten-hut!"

Idiot. We are at attention.

He whips off a wild, arm-swinging salute. We return it in crisp unison. He smiles again, orders us at ease. I quick slip a hand behind the lad next to me, bracing him up for a few seconds until he gets his color back and his feet steady. "Thanks," the lad whispers. I flash him a true/true smile.

Gary clears his throat, and pulls a fistful of notecards out of his pocket. "Today we reach the end of another academic year," he begins, in a voice too strident. "For the Academy, this has been a year of dynamic change and restructuring. For many of you, this has been a year of important personal growth and improvement as well." I lock in on the notecards; it looks like there's a lot of them. I start to zone out again.

A year of improvement? Only if your internal lexicon defines personal growth as "a form of cancer." For me, personal, this year has been a lot like drinking shots of battery acid.

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Not that it's been without humor. For example, there was the month the academy was infested with paleopunks. That's what we cadets called 'em, anyway: twenty paunchy, middle-aged guys in mohawks and raggy leather who spent their days hunting each other with splatguns. Had all

the subtle penetration skills of your average 5-ton truck; I could have taken the lot of them out with a half-dozen Grade Twos. Watching the leather boys in action was a real scream.

But that was about it for laughs, though. Mostly the year was a big bummer, with primary cause being the staff's rapid adjustment to the new order. Math professor Schmidt was the only one who actually resigned. Even Feinberg changed his tune after he got a big raise and a promotion to dean. Most of us Grade Fives got pretty damn disgusted, and in November, when the Koreans lobbed a few Silkworms at Hiroshima and the Nipponese started contracting for Peace Enforcement again, about half my class dropped out to enlist. (Too bad Clausewitz isn't alive today. He'd have coined a new dictum, just for the Nipponists: War is only business conducted by other means.)

The cadets who quit were more than replaced by a flood of eager young Nazis with shaky transcripts and middle-aged paramils who brought their own guns, though, and the last I saw of Payne, he was running a bunch of grownup clowns in Mohler-style camouflage through the new Fully Automatic Weapons seminar. (Funny, but even Jewbaiters like to fondle Uzis). I popped by the range one day to ask him a question and wound up watching them a few minutes, feeling sicker by the round. Lots of wild firing from the hip. Spent brass spraying everywhere. I guess the theory is if you waste enough bullets you don't need to actually aim, but I felt a small tremor in the earth from the Colonel doing somersaults in his grave.

Yup, definitely a new order in place. As my attention wanders across the faces on the reviewing stand—across the weasels, the bootlickers, the addled old fools—I make eye contact with Deke Luger, and for one last time we glare at each other with naked hatred. Yeah, Dougie Boy, I telepath, after six years I still hate your slimey guts, too. Most of us

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surviving Grade Fives despise Generalissimo Gary, but a few real twonks have flourished, and Douglas Kemuel Luger is undisputably top twonk. I flash him a smile that's really a bared-fangs challenge, and

beam off another telepath: If I'd known back in ComSurEx that you were

going to end up class valedectorian, I would have cut your throat.

His receptors must be down. Luger gives me a little disgusted snort,

then turns and locks eyes on Gary.

"—break with tradition," Gary is saying. I snap back from the zone

and go into full alert mode. "Before the usual valedictory address," Gary

continues, "I would like to take this opportunity to recognize a

graduating cadet whose unique gifts have made the academy a better

place for all concerned. Cadet Captain Michael A. Harris, front and

center!"

Huh? This isn't in the script. I start to flash into a nervous smile,

then shut it off. Looking confident going in is half of any battle. Derzky,

calm, I break ranks and mount the stairs to the reviewing stand. Already,

I'm mapping out fantasy tactical. If Gary's got something weird cooking

I just give him a shakoken palm-heel strike to the nose, draw my blade,

and take the old wheeze hostage. Then... Then...

Aw, piss on it. I'll improvise.

Gary's beaming at me as I snap to and salute next to him. (Nagare,

I'm thinking, let the action flow. Salute flows to kitenken hand-edge

strike flows to shikanken punch with my left fist...)

Gary returns the salute, then leans across the podium so his words

go into the microphone. "Cadet Harris," he says, "on behalf of the

students and staff of the Von Schlager Military Academy, I would like to

present you with this small token of our appreciation." He straightens up

and hands me a book; I cop a glance at the cover. Combat Theology,

allegedly by Commandant Gary Von Schlager.

I know this book. I helped Gary plagiarize it.

"Open it," he prompts. (Uh oh, I think, he found my "improvements"

and now he's gonna take revenge in front of...) Hesitant, I open the

book, to find a short, sappy dedication and an autograph. That's it. Geez,

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he wasn't kidding when he said the token was small.

"Thank you sir," I say, demure, and shake his hand.

The assembly applauds. Gary steps away from the microphone and

leans in close to me, crossing my reaction perimeter. (This is it! I think.

Nagare! Nagare!) “I hate to keep rehashing a dead horse—”

(Oh, so that’s what last night’s dinner was!)

“—but are you sure you don’t want to stay on as staff?”

I retaliate with a countergrin. “I haven’t been home in six years, sir.”

Gary nods. “I understand. Still, promise me you’ll think it over this

summer, okay?”

“Yessir. I certainly will.” We exchange salutes, and I wheel and

head for the stairs. I’ll think about it, all right; on a cold, cold, cold day

in Hell.

But then, just for a moment and completely in spite of myself, I

pause at the top of the stairs and turn thoughtful anyway. Looking out at

all those eager young faces, looking one last time around the quad: A

lot’s changed, these last six years. New faces, new buildings, new

attitudes.

New ghosts.

This kid Harris has changed, too. He’s older now: tough as blue

steel, chill and calm as a deep stream. He lives in a bigger world now,

and if you didn’t know better, you’d swear he was a deep-dyed

militaroid.

That’s what you’d think. But you’d be forgetting that there are two

constants in the universe: I’m still Mikey Harris. And Olders still don’t

know jack squat about computers.

I snap out of it, and start down the stairs. There’s one last job I’ve

got to do.

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END OF FILE: FF

The beauty of a well-designed network—like, for example, the one

that permeates every bunkhouse, classroom, and office in this

Academy—is that the physical devices don’t have to be anywhere near

each other. As long as they can talk to each other once in a while, the

hardware can be anywhere. Say, inside a dummy box-beam in the rafters

of bunkhouse “D.” Or behind a sheet of drywall on the second floor of

the science lab. Or even, say, inside a hollow concrete cinder block, in the foundation of the new wing of the Admin Building.

I glance over my shoulder to make sure my office door is closed.

Then I rest my fingers lightly on my terminal keyboard —hesitate, for just a mo—and key in one word: ARMED.

Throughout the system, little bits of mole code begin burying themselves. Incriminating files get erased. Audit logs disappear. I lean back in my chair, relax, watch the show.

There's a knock at the door. I blank the screen, swivel around.

"Enter."

It's Payne. "Well Harris, I guess this is it." He hangs there in the doorway, looking a little sheepish. I stand up, chop off a perfect salute.

"Goodbye, Mr. Payne."

He returns the salute, and offers me a handshake. "Goodbye, Mister Harris." The handshake is firm, strong; the respect is real. "We're going to miss you around here."

I smile, demure. "Don't worry." I lay a hand on the console terminal, pat it lovingly. "You've got my baby. In a way, as long as this system is still running, I'm still around."

In a very literal way.

Of course I left myself a back door. Hey, a cyberpunk designed this

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system. There's a custom circuit board buried deep in the inmost guts of the SatLink: slathered in black epoxy so no one can tell what it does; welded in place, so you'd have to junk the entire SatLink system to get rid of it.

Yes, Gary, I can link into the Academy network and wipe you out any day of the week. From any network node in the entire goddam world.

But that's just the contigency plan. The real plan is a lot more subtle, a lot more refined. Almost bulletproof: even if Gary hires a bootlicking weasel to replace me—and hey, he will, he's Gary—even if he finds another cyberpunk, there's not a thing he can do. I didn't just hack

around with code objects and exec scripts; I got into the operating system primitives. Right down to the BIOS and PROMs, this baby is mine. And my baby can defend itself.

Bare-metal programming. You'd have been proud of me, Mr. Lewellyn.

Payne shuffles his feet, clears his throat. "I'm, uh, taking the Tupelov down to Seattle tonight, to pick up a new load of summer boys, and I was thinking, if you didn't already have travel plans..."

I smile. "Sure." That'll give me some time. There were a few things I was wondering how I was going to tell Payne about. Like the bomb in the racial screening program that blows open a door for anyone named Washington, Jackson, or *berg. (Fudges their transcript, too; makes 'em look like goddam Aryan geniuses!) And the secret trapdoor that will let Payne browse through all of Gary's confidential email.

Payne nods, affirmative. "Right. See you at the strip at 1700, then."

He nods again, walks away.

I watch him leave, and smile. There are some things he needs to know, but I don't think I'll tell him about SLOW_BLEED just yet.

That's the leech I put in the financials. Nothing obvious; nothing indiscrete. I've gotten a lot better at timing since my cyberpunk days. I've learned about patience.

Two years. In two years, Gary will be bankrupt, and the Academy

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will be owned lock, stock, and barrel by the Ernst Von Schlager Memorial Trust. Eventually I'll have to tell Payne that he's the trust fund administrator.

Some day. But not today. I've got a lot of loose ends left to wrap up: Dad. My mother. Rayno. Georgie. Some day I've got to find out what happened to all of them.

But I can worry about all of that tomorrow. For today, for right now, this is Cadet Captain Michael Arthur Harris, logging out and powering down.

Mission complete, Colonel.